

TERROR IN THE THAMES

by
A. D. DIVINE



COLLINS
FORTY-EIGHT PALL MALL, LONDON

Mystery

A. D. DIVINE gives us another first-class thriller on the Thames—even better than *The Pub on the Pool* which we published in the spring. O'Hara, Ann and Ames, the skipper of the *Good Intent*,* are cruising in the Thames estuary in a twelve-ton cutter. They anchor off the West Oaze buoy to wait a favourable tide, and on taking up their anchor find that it is caught in a thin and flexible cable. That is the beginning of a chase that leads, through days of watching and nights when the fog comes down, up and down the river from Greenwich to the Nore. The story develops into an elaborate plot against the battleships of the fleet, and its tense drama of our coastal waters makes it a fit companion to

The Riddle of the Sands.



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CHAPTER I

SCOTT stared round the long level of the estuary and wrinkled his nose. Up the Warp, heading in for London River, was a deep-sea tramp, her funnel smoke drifted in easy curls towards the Essex shore. To seaward a solitary barge, her red sails bright against the light-blue haze, companioned the lightships. Nothing else moved on the river. "One," said Scott, "two. This ruddy place is as crowded as Petticoat Lane on a Sunday morning. Let's go somewhere and find a wide-open space where a man can be alone. Pull up the anchor, my good man, and let us be gone."

Captain Ames, stretched out at full length on a sail cover in the cockpit, took his pipe out of his mouth and waved it airily. He said nothing. Ann's voice came up through the hatch.

"Don't move, Uncle Henry," she called indignantly; then changing her note, she said, "If Mr. O'Hara would be after getting in the anchor why would he not get it in himself, and he the great strong man from County Down?"

"Donegal," said Scott, "and I think that's incitement to mutiny."

Captain Ames withdrew his pipe again and once more waved it, after the manner of one who would conduct an orchestra.

"He sits there and wags a pipe at me," said Scott helplessly. "Of all the crews I've ever . . . do you expect me to do all the work myself?"

"Yes," said Ann's voice through the hatch.

"If it wasn't unmanly," said Scott sadly, "I would shed tears."

Ann sniffed.

Scott went forward slowly, complaining all the way. He fitted the handle to the windlass and began to turn to the doleful wail of a capstan chanty.

Ann put her head up through the forehatch. "If I come up and help you will you stop singing?" she demanded hurriedly.

"What's wrong with my singing?"

So early in the mo-or-ning."

"For heaven's sake," demanded Ann, heaving herself up through the hatch.

*"Haul on the bowline,
The bowline haul."*

"Scott, will you stop?" Ann picked up the second handle and held it threateningly.

"Assault and battery," said Scott, "allied to mutiny and non-appreciation of my musical prowess—very serious. All right, my girl, bend your back to it. I misdoubt the old gentleman sitting comfortably on the cushions aft let go an overlong scope of cable last night in the erroneous belief that there was bound to be a gale some time."

"The glass was funny," said the girl.

"The glass, my foot," said Scott. "Put some weight on that handle."

There was a silent spell, broken only by the clicking of the pawl and the clank of the chain as it collected below the barrel of the windlass. Scott regarded the heap of it with disgust. "The beauty of a self-stowing arrangement for the cable is that it stows itself—I don't ruddy well think." He pulled savagely at the chain until it ran through the pipe again. They both stooped and went on with the work.

After five minutes Scott said, "Spell-o." He let go his handle and stepped to the side. "Up and down—as near as dammit," he said. He squinted up at the mainsail. It was already set and as he watched it ruffled itself gently in the light air. From the main his eye ran in a brisk survey of the rest of the gear, the foresail and the jib were both up in stops, everything was ready to get under weigh. He called out, "If the old gentleman on the cushions aft would push the tiller—you know, the wooden thing sticking out there—away from him gently, when I give the word."

"O.K., chief," said Captain Ames, taking the pipe out of his mouth for the third time.

"Oh, God," Scott groaned. "It only wanted that. Here, let's break the anchor out and see if we can't get away from him."

They bent to the windlass handles again.

"Funny," said Scott after a moment. "Seems damned heavy. There isn't more than three fathom under us at the outside."

"It's the heavy anchor," said Ann. "Uncle Henry thought——"

"I know it's the heavy anchor," said Scott icily. "I'm perfectly aware of the fact. But I also know that the heavy anchor doesn't weigh a ton. 'Vast heaving.'" He eased the windlass till the pawls caught and held it, and went to the side again. The anchor cable ran straight up and down, as taut as a bar.

"What the devil has gone wrong this time?" cried Scott. "There seems to be a hoodoo on our anchoring. There oughtn't to be any foul ground hereabouts; good, clean Thames sand, and a spot of mud here and there." He raised his voice. "Cap'n Ames, sir, we be foul o' summut."

"Clear it then," said Captain Ames lazily, settling back to his cushion.

"Helpful," said Scott. "Let's give another swing on the old organ. The damn' thing'll have to break out some time. If it doesn't we can always heave the ship under and make old Daddy Ames swim for it. Do him a world of good. Now heave—heave!"

From aft there floated a serene voice saying something about the lamentable weakness of the rising generation.

"I'll generate him," said Scott furiously, "'nother one. HEAVE!"

Ann straightened herself and smiled. "Now we *are* heaving the ship under," she said cheerfully.

Ames came strolling forward, his pipe between his teeth. "Anything the matter?" he asked with deliberate malice.

"No," said Scott. "We're just busy on a little salvage work. We're hauling the wreck up to the surface. Takes time of course. We think it's an Armada galleon."

"I think it's more likely somebody's anchor."

"Well, that's all right," said Scott, "I collect anchors. They tease me about it at the Press Club. I'm always producing an unexpected anchor for them to look at. Whenever I do the club wit says, 'Encore,' mispronouncing the word slightly of course, to make his meaning clear. Do you follow me? Why the devil should there be an anchor here?"

"Somebody slipping in a hurry," murmured Ames reasonably.

"Nuts," said Scott. "We're right inside the West Oaze Buoy on the tail of the bank. Why on earth should anybody want to anchor here?"

"Only a fool would anchor here, you mean?" said Ann.

"Yes," snapped Scott.

"Like us," said Ann.

"You get away from that windlass before he does you harm," warned Captain Ames, putting his pipe in pocket.

"Come on."

Ann went to the side and stared at the cable. The surge of the tiny estuary swell licked up it and fell away, leaving little beads of spray behind it. Behind her Scott and Ames were arguing. Scott was all for letting a fathom or two of cable go with a run and then heaving in again in the hope that the fluke of the anchor would clear whatever it was that was holding it. Ames wanted him to start the engine and,

moving the position of the yacht, get a freer pull from another direction.

She looked from the cable out over the still waters of the estuary. The tramp was already almost swallowed in the haze, to starboard of her there were two new ships showing, coming down the river with the first of the ebb; the barge was a little closer, inshore, against the dark shadow of the Isle of Sheppey, was the white hull of a motor cruiser.

Scott and Ames were still arguing with mock ferocity. Ann interrupted them. "There's a nice motor cruiser inshore, somewhere near the Spile. Shall I wave a white flag or something and ask them to come and help you?"

"Never take a woman on a small boat," said Scott sadly to Ames. "I may be only a wet amateur, but I know that as well as the pros. Are we going to try another heave, or aren't we?"

"Let a couple of fathom go," said Captain Ames.

For a moment the chain roared, then Scott braked the windlass, reversed the pawls, and the heaving began again. For a moment the chain came sweetly in, then there was a check. "Give her another," said Ames panting, "and another . . . little bit more . . . and a little bit . . . aaah."

"She's away," shouted Scott triumphantly.

"Then she's away in a damn' funny manner," said Ames, "because we aren't. Go on heaving."

"We're bringing it up, whatever it is," said Scott. "Ann, go aft. No; look over the side, can you see anything yet?"

"No."

The heaving went on.

"Anything yet?"

"No," said Ann. "Wait a minute. Yes. The stock's coming up."

"Nothing else?"

"Not yet. The stock's up now. Yes, there's a long snake—a rope or a wire or something."

"Vast heaving," said Ames. "Now, what the hell?"

The three of them leant over the side and stared.

"Continental cable, and a fine of fifty pounds," said Scott mournfully.

"Continental fiddlesticks," said Ames flatly. "What continental cable would run athwart the Mid Oaze bank?"

"Lightship telephone cable then," suggested Scott.

"Aren't any. They use wireless. Damme, they can't be leaving cables all round the Thames estuary like this, where half the shipping in the world anchors sooner or later when the fog's down. Cable be hanged, it's a wire hawser some damn' fool's dropped over the side."

"What's it doing inside the buoy then?" said Scott.

"Heave it up another fathom and let's have a proper look at it. May as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb. Tell us when it's clear of the water, Ann."

They bent to the windlass again. After a moment they were back at the side. Scott went over the bows and dropped till one foot rested on the bob stay.

"Wire hawser nothing," he said shortly. "It's insulated cable. Why it's thin; new too."

Captain Ames, kneeling on the deck, peered at the wire. "It's not ship's gear," he said at length. "Put a line round it and we'll drop the anchor from under and let it go. Awful penalties for getting mixed up with cable companies stuff." He spoke with the authentic horror of the seaman for the shore ends of cables.

Scott stretched out and tugged at the cable. "I can probably get it clear with my hand. Wait a minute, it's fairly slack this side—must be near an end."

"If we've parted it," began Ames in a mildly horrified voice.

"Parted nothing. If we'd parted it the anchor would have come clean away. I'm going to haul in the slack end and see where it finishes up. Come on. Give me a line."

With a little hard swearing they got the cable to the deck. Clearly enough it had not been in the water long. Equally clearly it was new. "Get a chisel, and let's see what a cross-section looks like," said Scott cheerfully.

"Good God, no," Captain Ames exploded. "We can't possibly. Then we *would* be for it. I'll help you overhaul it, though even——"

Scott grinned. "We can't very well pass it round the windlass. Still, I think we can work along it by hand. Heave! If we were a cable ship we'd have a nice little wheel in the bows. Heave! Very slowly they drew the ship along the dripping cable. They had worked her along perhaps thirty yards when the motion and the weight altered suddenly.

"Something's given," said Scott. "This is where we find the pot of gold. Do you suppose those idle beggars on the *Mouse* are watching us through a telescope?"

Ann glanced over at the lightship and then looked down at the water again. "There's something coming up," she said quickly. "Something long—cylinder or—here's the end."

The cylinder thudded against the yacht's side and came, wet and streaming water, on to the deck. It was perhaps eighteen inches long, with a diameter of five. About two-thirds of the way up its length—away from the wire—were three facets, ground out of the smooth sides. At the end was a small valve, controlled, apparently, by a nut set deep

in the flat surface. There was no inscription, the sides of the cylinder were smooth and polished, it was made apparently of stainless steel, or some corrosion resisting metal.

At the end where the cable entered it there was some rather clumsy soldering, and through the solder projected a tag of greyish metal, with a single letter "R" on it. There was nothing else to give any clue whatsoever to its use, or identity. Nothing even remotely to suggest its purpose.

"Well," said Scott judgmentally; "now we are where we are, where are we? What do you know, Captain Ames?"

"Navy muckings," said Captain Ames promptly. "That cable comes out from Sheerness. This is the end of some hush hush experimental work of theirs. Heave it over the side and let's get away. Doesn't pay in the least to poke one's nose into the navy's secrets. They don't like it, and I don't like being mixed up in it. Ann, go aft to the tiller—I'm going to break the fores'l out. We'll go off on the starboard tack and work down the Oaze. And I wouldn't talk about this when we get ashore either. Any of you. The navy doesn't like it."

"I'm not sure it is the navy's," said Scott, balancing the cylinder in his hands. "Perhaps Trinity House is experimenting with a leader cable, or something."

"Across the West Oaze sand?" asked Ames witheringly.

"Well, if it comes to that why does a cable come out from the Nore and then make a sudden dash and lie nor'-nor'-west across here. Doesn't fit, Uncle Henry. Still, it isn't our property. Ease it a bit past that fairlead there. That's right. We can now commit the body to the deep—and I wonder how many more innocent yachtsmen are going to foul their killicks in the bight of it. You know, it's a damned shame, trailing wire entanglements about a nice peaceful river like this. Hanged if I don't write a letter about it to the *Yachting Monthly* when we get home. Supposing that gale you're always looking for had come up—we'd have looked damn fine trying to get the hook in with that attached. Right-o. Let go. He hove the cylinder from him and watched it splash into the yellow water of the Thames. "Inconsiderate lot of beggars the navy. Never think of a yachtman's feelings. I hope they've lost that bauble. I shan't tell 'em where to find it. You were saying something about breaking out the fores'l, Captain Ames, sir. What about it. Do you realise, by the way, that if this has done nothing else, it has at least prised you out of that infernal cushioned nest you made for yourself after breakfast. On second thoughts, 'Up the navy.' It's done what I couldn't do, anyway."

CHAPTER II

"If you anchor at low water," said Scott, with the air of one who offers a profound truth to a world of ignorance, "I always say that you can't wake up and find that the tide's run out from under you."

"Like running aground at the top of the high tide," said Ann.

"What?" asked Scott suspiciously.

"Well, then you know that you can't sink any further. Are you going to cook supper or have I got to do it again?"

Captain Ames called up from the helm, "My turn."

Scott stared at the low sandbanks on either hand. They were in the little deep-water gut that runs between the Red Sand and the Spile. In the still September weather it was safe and perfectly comfortable to anchor among the Thames banks for the night. There was little more motion than that supplied by the wash of ships passing up and down stream, and the holding ground was good.

For a minute or two he held on, squinted back at the faint shape of the Girdler Lightship, four miles away, looked down at the beacon on the Spile Middle, and called back to Captain Ames, "Shake her up."

He took another cast of the lead, waited while the little ship lost way, and then let go the anchor.

When they had stowed sail they sat for another half-hour on deck. The evening was closing slowly over the Estuary. The light air that had brought them up the river from the Prince's Channel as the sun went down dropped utterly. The water took on, first in streaks that widened to pools, and then in great sheets that took up all the river, the lovely opalescence of the sunset calm. Fish leaping here and there made rings in it, but never broke it. The ripple of a distant collier's wash shaded it and forbore to shatter it. Only the gulls, quarrelling happily on the edge of the near sandbanks, chipped at the edges of the mirror as they brawled over the low tide spoil.

The sun had set long ago over London, and the brown fire in the west was already losing its brightness. Smoky banks, clouded purple and umber, lay under it already, and to seaward the night was coming up fast. A little procession of ships was hauling in from the outer sea. A P. & O. boat, sombre hulled and unlovely, led them. Astern of her, like an escort, were three Thames barges, with their sails hanging idle in the calm. Astern of them was a tug with a hopper

barge, a tug by itself, a coaster, a tall-sparred ketch yacht coming up under power, and, ghostly in the faint haze beyond, three nondescript shapes.

The Mouse lightship was winking pale in the twilight.

"I'm glad we came here," said Ann, sighing. "There's something about the river."

"Shouldn't have thought you'd ever want to see the river again after that business with the *Hill of Sligo*," said Captain Ames bleakly.

"That was mid-winter and a gale," Ann smiled. "This is different."

"Late summer and a flat calm," said Scott. "Very different. Come on, Captain Ames, sir. We've been here three days, and we've had less trouble from local inhabitants, made more discoveries, and had more fun than we'd have had on any thirty miles of coast between here and the west coast of Scotland. For a change there's nothing like exploring sandbanks well away from land."

"There's something weird about it, something fascinating. I don't know, I can't explain it, but this is a sort of no man's country to me; a stretch that the sea hasn't won and the land hasn't properly lost—yet." Ann smiled at the old man. "It's neither land nor sea, and we are allowed in it on sufferance, and only as long as we observe the rules—and there seems to be nobody to make the rules, except the gulls. Be honest, Uncle Henry, you've learnt more about the Estuary in three days than you knew after using the Port of London for thirty years—you said so when we bumped on the Barrow yesterday morning."

"There's something in it," said Ames thoughtfully. "But words said in the heat of the moment aren't meant to be remembered. 'Tisn't what I'd call yachting."

"Ho." Scott wrinkled his nose scornfully. "What you'd call yachting is working in and out of Cowes Roads under motor, and going to sea when the steward and the paid hands said that it was a fine day. Now, *this* is fun. Sooner or later we'll get stranded on a lee shore in a rising wind—then you'll see what I mean."

"I hope," said Captain Ames placidly, "that we'll have had supper some time before that happy event."

They ate, and sat out on the deck again in the glow of the riding light. The night-time panorama of the Estuary was spread out and around them. The Mouse to the northward, with the West Oaze buoy winking faintly, a pin prick in the darkness in between. The Girdler to the eastward. The Nore to the west. Lesser lights like bright stars almost beyond counting. Lights of shipping moving in and out, lights over on the Sheppey shore. Stars in the sky that hung

down their lights into the water, and the faint blink of phosphorescence overside. The night was very peaceful. The thud of the screw of a ship going light through the Oaze came to them like pulse beats, swift and steady, the thresh of a homing paddle-steamer, going back to Southend with its load of trippers, was like breakers on a friendly shore. Birds flew in the silence, the thrust of their wings plain above the ripple and plash of the water against the sides. Once and again a drift of wind came to them from the Nore like a sigh off the land, the weary, heat-drenched, windless land.

There were long silences as they sat. Captain Ames broke one of them. "That wire now," he said.

"What of it?" Scott waved an airy hand in the darkness.

"We didn't harm it, and there doesn't seem to be any fuss," said Ann.

"Nobody's turned out the Atlantic Fleet to hunt down the culprits," said Scott cheerfully. "What are you beefing about? I came back here specially to see if they'd set any tin-pot guard over the place, but . . ." He waved over towards the West Oaze buoy. "Not a peep. I don't believe it's—what did you call it, navy muckings?—at all. That cylinder thing might have been a cable end of some sort, hauled over the tail of the spit there out of harms way. It's probably a cable company's experimental line or something. Test length to try out corrosion in a new metal perhaps."

"There'd have been a warning in the Admiralty notices if it was so," said Captain Ames.

"Equally if it had been a naval do."

"Perhaps not. They don't notify everything they do, not by a long way. Ah, well, Doesn't seem any harm done. Shall we turn in?" Captain Ames yawned.

"Wait a minute. If it isn't Trinity House, and it isn't a cable company, and it isn't the navy, who is it?"

"Dunno," said Captain Ames with unexpected energy. "Write a letter to Aunt Mabel. All working girls' questions answered, send sealed envelope for private reply."

"Throw in your hand, Scott," said Ann blithely.

"There's no competing," grumbled Scott. "The only thing to do is to take a leaf out of his book and use his favourite closing gambit. 'What about turning in?'"

Captain Ames laughed deeply, and a gull on a nearby sandbank squawked in sudden alarm and fled off querulous into the night.

"See what you've done, Uncle Henry," said the girl. "Go to bed."

As they turned in, Scott said, "Harwich to-morrow?"

"'Tisn't a port I love," said Captain Ames combatively.

"I'm not asking you to be unfaithful to Mrs. Ames," said

Scott acidly. "Harwich? Or shall we go round the corner and play tag with the Goodwins?"

From the fore cabin Ann's voice said, "Oh, let's stay in the river. It's so peaceful here."

Half an hour later, as she switched off her light, she said again, "So peaceful."

Scott grunted and went on reading the *North Sea Pilot Book*.

It was about twenty minutes later that he heard first the mutter of engines. "Still awake, Ann?" he asked softly.

A faint "Yes" answered him.

"Well, here's your peace and quiet. We anchor right in between the banks and somebody comes joy riding round with a motor boat."

"It'll pass," said Ann sleepily. "Is that all?"

They lay silent, listening to the sound. The approaching boat was powerful, that much was certain from the first. Scott guessed lazily that she was twin screwed, and about fifty feet long.

The noise increased steadily, after a minute or so it was clear that she was going to pass close to them. "River hogs," said Scott softly, so as not to wake Captain Ames. "Stockbrokers in a chromium. Their wash will chuck all the water in the Thames about, damn their eyes."

The noise was closer and closer still. A swift, regular burr, more like an aeroplane's engines than a boat's in the still night air.

"They must be coming straight for us," said Ann, her voice a little worried. "D'you think——"

"Do I think what?"

"Oughtn't you to flash the torch at them—or——"

"Get out of my nice warm bunk, go up on deck in pyjamas, allow the night wind to whistle through the interstices. Do you really think I'm going to get up and wave torches at every motor boat on the river just for your benefit, Ann?"

"They're coming very close, perhaps our riding light——"

"Is burning very nice and bright, my dear. Since they can see it even more plainly than I can, I don't think we need worry. It's just possible, of course, that it's the Customs again."

"Oh," said Ann.

Scott shook his head. "The feeling of guilt that engulfs a woman whenever the word Customs is mentioned astonishes me. I suppose it's because all women are natural born smugglers, having an ingrained contempt for His Majesty's Excise. Of course in your case it's by way of being a family tradition. Look here, that boat is getting damned close. By the engines, it's not the long blue boat that examined us off Brightlingsea. I don't know where the Customs station is this

side of the water—well, they'll knock. Jolly time of the night to come. . . . Good God Almighty! Ames—look out! Hell and the devil . . .”

He stopped as he was thrown violently from his bunk. In the same instant the light in the cabin went out. In the darkness there was a rending crash. Wood splintered with a vicious, tearing sound. He heard the grind of metal on metal, the roar of engines seemed to hit in his very ears. Water rushed past him. He heard Ames swearing like a cat in the darkness. Heard Ann calling. Heard a thud, thud, thud down the side, and then there was a sudden end to the wilder noises, and only the roar of engines, dying swiftly away.

The water covered him as he lay on the floor. Something had jammed above him, something hard, he tried to move it, but he was pinned. The water was roaring in. His face was barely clear, a surge swept over it and he choked as it went down to his lungs. He fought furiously, gasping as the water left him. He was trapped, pinned down here in the dark like a rat with a broken back. In a minute the water would be over him. He thrust wildly, clawing for a handhold, trying to brace his feet against the sides of the lockers. He was done for. The water washed over him again. He made one last choking effort, his body tensing, every muscle keyed up to unimaginable strength.

The effort failed.

And then suddenly there was light in the cabin. A hand, thrust through the companion-way, was holding a torch. Ames came out from under a pile of oilskins and bedding and a half-closed berth. Even as he dropped to the floor he bent, put his great hands on the long drawer that had jammed between the lockers, and, with a mighty heave, dislodged it. Bending again, he caught Scott by the shoulders and lifted him.

Ann, still holding the torch, was coming down the companion way. “Are you all right?” she asked over and over again. “Are you all right?”

“Yes. For God's sake,” said Ames, “get the dinghy, quick! She's sinking.”

He pushed Scott towards the steps. Scott went, dazed; climbing automatically.

As he came into the fresh night air, Ann said, “The dinghy's gone.”

CHAPTER III

"ARE you sure?" Ames pushed past him. "How . . . it's not sunk, is it?" He dropped on his knees at the stern, groped for and found the dinghy painter, and pulled it in.

The ring that had been set in the dinghy's stem came with it.

Instantly on his feet again, Captain Ames cupped his hands; very faintly in the starlight they could see the shape of something disappearing up the river. "Come back," he bellowed. "Come back, you . . ."

Suddenly he dropped his hands. "That's not much use. Sorry, Ann." He turned. "You all right?" he asked.

Scott coughed again. "More or less," he said weakly. "God, that was a near thing. I've got half the Thames down my lungs. Look here, we must do something."

Ann said, "I saw them." They turned to her. "I saw them. It was a big white motor-cruiser. She had no lights. She went straight on. I shouted, but there wasn't any answer. Scott, they did it on purpose—it wasn't an accident."

"Looks like it," said Scott grimly. "Give me the torch," he wheezed and was suddenly sick. "Better," he said as the spasm was over. "Shifted most of the water." He took the torch and dived below.

Ames followed him.

There seemed to be not very much more water than when they had gone on deck. Above the foot of Scott's bunk there was a great hole in the side between two frames, through which they could see the night. Water was coming in below the bunk somewhere, but it had not yet reached the top of the row of lockers.

"Pump, Ann," Scott yelled. "There's a chance. Skipper, if we can find where the water's coming in."

"She'll not float long enough," said Ames gruffly. "The pump won't do anything against that."

Scott was thinking fast.

"The Red Sand can't have more than two or three feet of water on it yet," he said. "Start up the engine. I'll slip the cable and we'll put her on it. That'll give us a bit of breathing space, anyway. And we'll need it."

Ames grunted. "There's a chance," he said, and went aft to the tiny engine-room.

Scott jumped on deck and ran forward. "Stick it, Ann," he shouted as he ran. "There's a chance yet."

He let the cable run, watching for a shackle with his hand on the brake of the windlass. Ames had started the engine

before, struggling with bleeding fingers in the glow of the little torch, he had slipped the shackle. The last of the chain went overboard with a burst of sparks as it whipped against the windlass. Ames let in the clutch. The ship began to move very slowly in the night.

Ames came on deck as Scott seized the wheel and jammed it over, heading the yacht up till she pointed almost at the Mouse lightship. "Shouldn't be more than two hundred yards," he said. "Heave everything you can into the starboard bunks. If you can get any ballast up from the port side chuck that over. If we can get her to heel well over to starboard we'll maybe lift that smash clear of the water.

Ames disappeared below again.

The yacht gathered way, sliding through the still water towards the invisible sands. Ann, bending over the sunken handle of the pump, worked at it desperately. The water flooded into the cockpit in a strong stream, a heartening stream. As she pumped, she gasped, "What is it Scott? What does it mean? Who could it have been?"

"Find that out later," said Scott. "Pump, Ann. We're doing it. Thank God the engine's good and high. Another fifty yards . . ."

He could feel the slant of the deck now, Ames was getting her over at last, working furiously in the darkness below.

Swiftly Scott was calculating the tides. Calculating their position. Calculating the drift of the current. Desperately matching his new-found knowledge of the Estuary against disaster. They should have touched the sand by now, he thought. Surely the tide could not have flooded enough to let them across the top of the ridge. Had he made a mistake in the darkness? Had he missed the sands? The Mouse was there well off the port bow, blinking steadily in the darkness, the lights of a big ship passing inward close to her.

The ship staggered suddenly, dragged a little, bumped sickeningly, and was swiftly fast. In the same instant the engine stopped and Ames's head appeared through the hatch again. "Done it," he said. "I've got the box of flares here. 'Bout time we lighted up."

"Put 'em away," said Scott. "We can't play with fireworks now. We've got to save the ship."

"We've got to get the lifeboat off," retorted Ames grimly. "She's made six inches since we started, against Ann's pumping."

"We can't sink any further than we are for the time being," said Scott cheerfully. "So the lifeboat can stay at home. Thank heaven it's a quiet night."

"Nonsense," said Ames.

"Nonsense, yourself, Uncle Henry," said Scott. "If

we bring out the lifeboat it's long odds we'll bring back our fancy friends long before it reaches us. Ann's right, that wasn't an accident. No time to talk about that, though. 'Fraid you'll have to go on pumping as long as you can, Ann. Skipper, let's find that hole."

He flashed the torch over the tangle of the deck. Cut in through the planking, in a ragged tangle of broken wood and snarled rope, was a rough V, perhaps two feet deep. The side planking edged the hole in ugly spikes and shafts of splintered pine.

"Hold the torch," said Scott, "and hang on to my legs if you can. I want to feel down the side. God, what a dunt!" He fell on the deck, stretched himself over the side, and plunged his arm into the water.

The worst of the damage ended above the waterline—even above the low line of their floating. Below that point the planking was cracked and strained, but there was no open wound of any size that he could feel.

"Something soft," said Scott. "Something I can plug with."

Silently Ann stretched out a scarf which Ames passed on. "Stout work," said Scott. Swiftly he went to work, thrusting the soft stuff into cracks and crannies wherever his fingers could feel them out. "Won't stop it," he said at length, "but it ought to reduce the flow."

Ames said, "We're afloat again."

"Rising tide. Gosh, it comes up quickly! Start the kicker again if you can. I'm going to get the kedge ready. Ann, stop pumping and steer when the engine starts, I'll give you the course."

Before he had got the light kedge-anchor free, the purr of the engine had begun again. Over his shoulder he shouted directions to Ann. A minute or two later they bumped again.

Ames came on deck. "Shall I leave her running?" he called.

"Yes," bellowed Scott.

The old man came on deck again. "Won't last much longer. I fancy," he said. "Water's pretty near things now."

"What's the tide range here," said Scott. "Fifteen feet?"

"No, no, no," said Ames hurriedly. "Neap tide, it is. Little more than ten at the outside."

Scott turned on him eagerly. "You sure?" he demanded.

"Certain?"

"Can't be more'n that," said Captain Ames.

"Then we're saved," said Scott. "The sand was a good two feet clear of the water when we saw it at low tide. That means there won't be more than eight feet over it at the top of the flood. We're drawing about six feet now, and we can

sink another three feet or so without anything really drastic happening. If we can get her a little higher up the sand as the tide rises, we'll do. Keep that engine going for the love of Mike."

He finished getting the kedge ready and ran aft again. Ann was still pumping with a dogged weariness.

"Atta girl," said Scott. "Buckets now if we can find 'em."

He dropped into the splashing darkness of the saloon.

While he searched for the buckets in the wilderness of the galley, Ames shouted, "We're off again."

"Drive her up," said Scott.

The engine slipped into gear, he felt the vibration increase. Fumbling he found a bucket, and under it another. Even as he closed his fingers on them the engine faltered, coughed once, ran again for a dozen strokes and was suddenly and absolutely silent.

With one huge leap he was on the coaming of the forecastle hatch. In an instant he was on the deck. Even as he reached it he pushed the kedge-anchor over and waited while the warp followed it.

Ames below was wrestling furiously with the engine.

"Don't bother about that thing, it's dead," said Scott, dropping through the forehatch again. "There's more water than I like under us, but we can't help that. Anyway, we're *not* going to sink. Come and bail, Uncle Henry."

He splashed aft through the water, knee-deep-everywhere along the cabin floor now. "Top of the hatch. I'll pass the bucket up. Can you carry on with the pump for a bit, Ann?"

Ames passed him the torch silently, and he hung it on a hook. The bailing started. Bucket after bucket Scott filled, passed with a jerk of his shoulders to Ames half-way up the ladder. Ames emptied them, passing the empty bucket down as the next full one came up. It became a terrible, mechanical routine. They worked in silence save for the clang of the buckets, the splash as Ames flung the water to the cockpit, the crash as Scott dipped, with a single powerful lunge the sob and wheeze of the racing pump.

After ten minutes of it Scott gasped suddenly, "Gaining."

"Ha," said Ames abruptly.

"Stick it, Ann."

They went on, bucket after bucket in a long, clanging stream. They seemed to have fallen into the smoothness of machines now. The boat was steady, there was no movement from the sea. Ames matched Scott's rhythm to the very fraction of a beat. His hand was there to take the bucket even as Scott's hoist ended. The splash as he emptied it marked the splash as Scott filled the next. Bucket after bucket. Minute after minute.

After another five minutes Scott said, "Gaining fast, now. We've done it. Stick it."

The procession of the buckets went on.

Scott shifted his position. The deep water was on the starboard side now. Already it was growing shallow where he stood. He began to chant, in a gasping wheezy voice "We're beating it. We're beating it. We're beating it."

At the end of another five minutes he said, "Captain Ames, give Ann a spell at the pump. She must be just about dead. I'm going to chuck her over a bit more to starboard. That leak's high up."

He felt under the shallow water for the place where Ames had got the floor-boards up, and, grabbing a pig of ballast, tossed it over into the starboard berth. Another followed it, and another. It was hard on the hands, clawing blindly for the iron blocks below the water, but pig after pig went through the air to crash against its fellows on the starboard side.

The boat heeled further and further, lying over at an alarming angle. Once Ames protested, but Scott only grunted in reply and hoisted up another pig.

At length he stopped, went to the hole, and flashed his torch in the open lockers beneath it. Then he went on deck.

"I won't bet," he said slowly; "but I think we've got it clear. Once again he sprawled himself half-over the side. This time he examined the battered planking with the torch. The hole was clear of the water.

For the next hour, while Ann, after a rest, took over the pumping again, Ames and Scott worked desperately at the hole. With white lead, a square of blanket, and a sheet of thin metal from the sides of a petrol can they patched the lower section of the hole. Canvas and planking torn from the bottoms of the locker drawers covered the top. Before they were finished the pump sucked dry. There was still water, but with the wild heel of the ship it was out of range of the pump.

Scott laughed when he heard the noise.

Long before they finished the tide turned. Scott swore mildly as the ship swung round. "When I came here I hoped we would ground," he said. "Now I hope to God we don't. Skipper, go below and see if you can't coax life back into that engine. We'll be here till midday if you can't, and God knows I don't want that."

"Time enough for that later," said Ames calmly. "I'll get in the kedge, and we'll let the tide take us into deep water. We'll clear the top of the sand easily with the first of the ebb."

"What a brain," said Scott admiringly. "I never thought of that."

Scott drove in the last nail at a quarter to three, and came

away from the side. "Get her on an even keel again," he said. "We've had God's own luck. If there'd been as much as a ripple in the river we'd have been sitting on the bottom by now. Ann, did I hear a primus going just now?"

"You did," said Ann. "Cocoa's ready."

"What a girl," said Scott warmly. "First she pumps half the North Sea out of the ship, and then she produces cocoa, hot, by jove! With the galley all lying on its backside. Will you marry me, Ann?"

"As a wife or as a pump hand?" asked Ann caustically.

"As a cook," said Captain Ames. "Ha! That's made a new man of me. I shouldn't marry him, Ann. He leads young girls into trouble. Look what he's done for you this trip. If you hadn't pumped so damned hard we'd have sunk, and it'd have been all his doing."

"You come and shift ballast," said Scott brusquely. "And stop spoiling my chances. We haven't time to talk yet. What depth did you anchor in?"

"Five fathom," said Captain Ames. "No need to worry."

"I'm not worrying about depth," said Scott. "I'm worrying about our little friends. There's no telling that they won't come at dawn to see what sort of a job they made of it. I want to be away up the river by the first of the light."

Swiftly and carefully they moved the ballast back till the water ran gurgling and swishing through to the bilges and the ship floated almost upright.

"Motor next," said Scott.

"I've dried the plugs and the magneto, and I've cleaned out the filter. She ought to start." Captain Ames lumbered over to the starting handle and swung.

It took them ten minutes to get the engine running properly, but at the end of that time it seemed little the worse for its immersion. Swiftly they got the anchor in, swung into the deep channel, and headed up the river against the ebb.

With Ann steering, Scott pumped her dry, clearing out the water that had lain in the curve of the side. When he had finished he stretched himself. "What about a long, long drink?" he asked.

Ames, rummaging below in the wrecked lockers, found the brandy flask. "A short one will do you more good," he said brusquely. "Here's how."

"Here's to us," said Scott in turn. "And now we've got time to talk, here's hell and damnation to those murdering swine that ran us down. Oh, for a single, solitary shred of a sign of their identity."

Calmly from her corner in the dark cockpit, Ann said, "I think I know the ship. I'm almost positive that it was that white motor cruiser that we saw when we were foul of the

cable yesterday afternoon. I saw her again when we put about round the Edinburgh lightship. She was lying up the Black Deep, but I didn't take any particular notice of her."

"Well, I'm damned," Scott whistled. "And what do you think of that, Captain Ames?"

"Ann's the only one who saw anything of her," said Ames slowly. "By the time we made the deck she was out of sight, or as near it as made no difference." He peered at the girl in the faint starlight. "Ann doesn't as a rule make mistakes about things like that. Would you know her again?"

"I'd know her anywhere," asserted Ann.

"I never saw her, either last night or yesterday. I know one thing about her, though, she had a curved yacht bow, rather pronounced, and a fairly wide flare close up to the stem head. Is that right?"

"That's what made the hole, anyway," said Captain Ames. "If she had had a straight up and down stem, nothing would have saved us. The overhang of the bow it was that hit us, and the deck took most of the shock."

"She was one of these streamlined things with a motor car deck-house and a very exaggerated bow. Offhand I should say she was built foreign. She was all white, she had square ports, three of them in a row, just for'ard of her deck-house, and there was no visible funnel. The deck-house might have been painted cream, or it may just have been dirty. When we've got a bit of light I'll draw you a picture of her." Ann paused.

"I wonder who the devil it was? And why? Why, why, why? We're not harming anybody out in the Estuary here. We've not run foul of anybody lately. Do you think it could be any one out of the old crowd?"

"White Mike, d'you mean?" snapped Ames. "Couldn't be. White Mike's still in gaol. Got three more years to run. So's Breitenbach. One or two of the small fry have been let go—but none of them . . . Why, good heaven's it's ridiculous. None of them would have had the guts to . . . Good God." Ames was suddenly explosive. "None of them, not one. Where would a bunch of pigeons be able to get hold of a ship like that, anyway? And would they be willing to risk it if they did? And anyhow, how would they have got in touch with us? We fetched up at the West Oaze buoy in a fog and a flat calm. We didn't mean to go there. Didn't know we were going there ourselves. Nonsense."

"He's probably right," said Scott thoughtfully. "And ruling White Mike out, who else is there? And why?"

"Suppose it was just carelessness," said Ann tentatively.

"Carelessness my foot," Scott snorted. "With our riding light burning like that? I saw it just before the crash."

Besides, they wouldn't have run like that if it had been carelessness. They'd have stood by to pick us up."

"Panic?" asked Ann.

"No." Scott shook his head vigorously. "They got us and they got our dinghy, and they cleared as hard as they knew how, and that's just plain murder. The very plainest kind. Somebody must have wanted to rub us out very badly, very badly indeed. Can you think of any reason why anybody should want us out of the way? I can't. If Breitenbach had still been at large—yes. But he isn't. We know that. So what?"

"We come back," said Captain Ames softly, "to that damned length of cable."

"Oh, rubbish." Scott sniffed vigorously. "If anybody had it in for us over that length of cable, they'd charge us at the Thames Police Court, or wherever it is they do that sort of thing, and get us fined five quid. They wouldn't want to murder us."

"The white boat," said Ann slowly, "was watching us when we had it up to our bows."

CHAPTER IV

"THIS," said Scott slowly, "is an unprofitable discussion. Turn in the two of you. The port berth for'ard, or the fore-castle berths ought to be fairly dry. I'll take her till dawn."

He watched the others go below, and steadied the little ship on her course for the Nore. The night was dark still, pricked here and there by the uneasy lights, with a white glow over Sheerness, and a brighter glow over Southend beach. Ships were moving up and down the river, but only a barge, dark-winged in the night, passed close to them, drifting down with the tide, her sails slack in the lifeless air.

Steadily the Southend lights drew nearer and nearer. They were almost up to the Nore now, its brilliant lantern cut every half-minute across the night. They passed it, pressed on and made Southend Pier in the first faint forerunner of the dawn. A little wind came up with the dawn, running out of the west, heavy with land scents, the thin acridness of smoke, and the rich, ripe smell of Thames mud, and a faint drift of petrol from the Thameshaven dumps.

By the Maplin light the sun came up, slipping through the thin dawn mist, and killing the little wind. Scott rapped on the cabin top for his relief, and Captain Ames, bleareyed, thrust his head instantly through the hatchway. He was followed a moment later by Ann, yawning.

"When you two have unaddled what brains you have," said Scott caustically, "we will continue the discussion from where we left off last night. I recommend a bucket of cold water for each of you."

Ann yawned again, said, "I thought it was something important," and disappeared.

Five minutes later she was on deck again, her hair tidied, her eyes fresh and clear, and her whole person showing nothing of the night's ordeal.

Captain Ames followed her.

"Charming," said Scott approvingly. "Now, I've been thinking, and a whole lot of problems seem to arise. What are we going to do?"

"Let's have it," grunted Ames.

"Well, first point is that I think Ann's right. It is that cable. But that's no more than a guess—and I have absolutely nothing to support it except Ann's evidence."

"Why fix on it?" said Ames sharply.

"Why not? I've thought over last night's business from every possible angle. It couldn't have been accidental, our light was bright, we were well out of any fairway, and nobody—not even a stockbroker in a chromium—would navigate without some sort of lookout among sand banks at night with a strong tide running."

"When you've been at sea as long as I have," said Captain Ames weightily, "you'll learn, young man, that nothing is impossible. Suppose they were drunk. . . ."

"Then we'd have heard something. Some shouting, laughing, anything. They made off much too deliberately for that."

"Sobered up by the shock," said Captain Ames.

"When you've been drunk as often as I have——" said Scott frostily. "Wait a minute, I've thought of all that, but their behaviour afterwards is absolutely against it. They ran us down, and they got away with our dinghy, and they knew it, and they carried on. What could it have been if it wasn't deliberate?"

"Accidental," said Captain Ames stubbornly. "Look here, supposing it was some one at the old lay?"

"Smuggling?"

"Yes. Some one coming over from Holland or Belgium or somewhere, going to run the cargo up the Kentish creeks, the Swale for choice. Faversham, or Conyers Creek, or Milton way. It would be just right, coming in with the half-flood."

"It was after half-flood," said Scott, "and they wouldn't come by the Spile and the Red Sand if they were coming in from Holland for the Swale."

"Perhaps you're right," said Ames reflectively. "They were making for the Medway then. The creeks behind Sheerness."

"We were lying up and down the tide," said Scott slowly, "and she hit us on the port side. If she was on her course, she was coming in right across the top of the sands, from the direction of the Mouse—which is absurd. She wouldn't have floated across the top of the west of the Red Sand. However she came she must have made a curve between us and the sand to have hit us at the angle she did. Is that clear?"

Ames nodded. "It still doesn't rule out smuggling, though. Might have broached the cargo on the way over and been tight. Make a curve easy enough with a hand off the wheel for a minute or so. Suppose they came over to see what we were, expecting to meet a friend hereabouts—boat to transfer to perhaps—and misjudged distances."

"If you had run somebody down when you were in the trade," said Scott deliberately, "would you have just ploughed on, knowing that you'd sunk their dinghy too?"

"Anybody smuggling would naturally want to get clear away as quickly as possible," said Ames evasively. "They wouldn't want to run the risk of examination and inquiries and all the rest of it."

"Would you have left them to drown?" said Scott quietly.

"They wouldn't want to be bothered by lifeboats and all the——"

"Would you have left them . . . ?"

Cornered, Ames was silent for a moment, then he said slowly, "I don't know. Perhaps I wouldn't—can't tell."

"Of course you wouldn't" said Scott triumphantly. "Why do you think that anybody else——"

"Because," said Captain Ames grimly, "White Mike would."

Ann looked up. "Uncle Henry's right." "White Mike would. Only White Mike's in gaol."

"There's more than one White Mike," said Ames quickly.

"God forbid," sighed Scott piously. "All the same, you don't carry conviction, skipper. Your smugglers have to be coming from the wrong direction, they have to be very, very drunk indeed, they have to be phenomenally calm and in control of themselves in spite of the liquor, after the crash, and they have to be as tough as the worst specimen of a tough man in the trade. It won't do. There are too many 'ifs' about it. My idea—Ann's idea too—is much simpler. There's only one 'if.'"

"And that is?"

"If somebody had put that cable there for some purpose

that was not lawful—then they would quite naturally want to rub out anybody who grubbed it up."

"And what is that purpose?"

"That," said Scott calmly, "is what we're going to find out."

There was complete silence in the little cockpit, save for the rumble of the engine below them, and the rustle and splash of the water overside. Captain Ames filled his pipe slowly and methodically, cramming in the least last sliver of tobacco with a vast forefinger. When it was lit and drawing well, he blew out three enormous smoke clouds and rising, stepped out of the cockpit and on to the deck. There, still silent, he got on to his knees, leaned far out over the side, and examined the patch. Finally he got to his feet again. "Have to get a new boat then," he said shortly.

Scott chuckled. "And you, Ann?" he asked.

"Oh, I'd decided that long ago," said Ann. "It's just a matter of 'how.'"

"Go straight to the Port of London Authority and tell 'em about it," suggested Ames gruffly.

"From a captain using the Port of London for as long as you have been, Captain Ames, sir, that's a damn' silly suggestion."

"Why?" Ames fairly barked.

"Because it's a good three miles outside the P.L.A.'s jurisdiction," said Scott. "They've neither power to act, nor authority to investigate. Any more silly suggestions?"

"The Admiralty, then," said Ames, "Whitehall."

"And miss all the fun of tracking it down by ourselves?" said Scott lazily. "And all the excitement—not to mention the honour and glory—and get nothing out of it but a letter beginning, 'Sir, I am commanded by their Lordships . . . ' Gertcher. Captain Ames, I'm surprised at you. Are you weakening?"

"I'm growing old."

Both Ann and Scott laughed. Ann said, "I've known you since I was seven, Uncle Henry, and every single time you've started out on some new piece of devilment I've heard you say that. Growing old——"

"Well, what are you going to do?" Ames settled himself on the cabin top. "And while you're thinking about it, I'd stand over a bit more to the Kentish shore. There's a Castle boat coming down the river, and we aren't in any condition to fight with her wash."

Before Scott could speak Ann said, "Let's borrow or hire a motor cruiser, say nothing about this, and slip straight out again and watch. We're sure to see something."

Scott shook his head. "No," he said. "Honesty's

the best policy. Maximum publicity. Dash it all, you forget I'm a journalist. I want our story splashed——"

"And frighten 'em away for good and all?" said Ames sarcastically.

"We'd do that if we didn't have a bit of publicity," said Scott slowly. "Look here, if their watch was good enough to spot us yesterday, and their organisation was determined enough to do what it did last night, then I'll lay odds that they know we've got clear by now, and will expect things to happen accordingly."

Ann nodded.

"Therefore, if we go in, put this ship up on the slip, and say the skipper or somebody kicked the side in in a fit of temper, they'll know we know. If, on the other hand, we go in, report to the police, and the Customs, and then get Weeks to do a splash story in the *Clarion*—I think we can probably put across quite a comprehensive bluff."

"And if we tell the *Clarion* about the cable?" said Ames.

Scott shook his head. "But we won't tell the *Clarion* about the cable," said he softly. "We'll tell the *Clarion* that the Thames must be made safe for the democratic yachtsman. We'll ask for proper protection from drunken waterhogs. We'll ask, 'What are the police doing?' We'll be as angry as a cat in a thunderstorm. And we'll give a description of the boat that'll be near enough to convince the other side, and far enough off to prevent the police or anybody else from identifying it."

"Do you think she's got clean away without any damage?" demanded Ames. "She'll have marks all over her bows, and she'll have to explain those away first port she goes into."

"If this bunch can't get over a little difficulty like that," said Scott cheerfully, "then they're not what I take them for—and they won't be worth our powder and shot. But I'll lay you a bet at quite decent odds, Captain Ames, that no ship will be identified in a local port, with collision marks on her bows."

"H'm," said Captain Ames reflectively.

In silence they slid up through the honey-coloured water of the Thames. Sea Reach held a dozen ships, coming down with the last kick of the ebb tide under them, and a great potholer of smoke and soot to stain the clean morning. There were smaller ships too, and a shrimper drifting down with the tide called out as he passed, "Any old iron?"

"Drinking again?" said Ames waspishly across the water, and a row of heads bobbed up and grinned.

"Damn his eyes," said Scott. "Now, I call that patch a nice, slap-up piece of tailoring, seeing we did it on our stomachs in the dark mostly."

Ann rescued some eggs from the general confusion of the galley and they ate them with bacon and methyated spirits as they passed the powder hulks in Mucking Bight.

And in the Lower Hope the tide turned, so that they went up the river grandly, while the morning sang with the booming of the ships, and the clean crisp rustle of the water, and the calling of the gulls.

Off Coalhouse Point Ann called Scott's attention to the low mounds and the gabled gateway of Tilbury Fort. Ames poked his head round and stared at it. "Always liked that place," he said. "Sort of milestone on the inward runs. When we'd made the fort we were right in the river."

"Better start rehearsing the old dear's speech," said Scott placidly, "How was it she began. 'I am but a poor weak woman——'"

"Don't make fun of Queen Elizabeth," said Ann acidly. "And why should I learn that speech anyway. When she made it England had to face an Armada."

"I've heard," said Scott coolly, "that Chatham is a naval port. At a guess there may be another Armada mixed up with that odd end of cable somewhere."

Captain Ames, below in the wreck of the cabin, snorted.

"Don't do that," said Scott swiftly. "It sounds as if there's something wrong with the engine. Come on, Ann. 'I am but a poor weak woman——'"

CHAPTER V

"AND therefore," said Scott, "I want my name kept out of it, and the fact that I, too, am one of the great Fellowship of Fleet Street."

"You didn't get a crack on the head, when they hit you?" asked Weeks suspiciously.

"I did not," said Scott. "You can call me Maltravers, and say I'm a bricklayer's tallyman if you like. Make it a good story, Weeks, snappy, full of pep, something that subs like and news editors rave over; something that will send all the kitchenmaids of England snivelling to the Port of London Authority on our behalf. A heart-throb in every line, a sensation in every paragraph. Only keep my name out of it."

"*Ars est celare O'Hara*," said Weeks gloomily. "I'll try to work in a paragraph on the back page."

"And listen," Scott disregarded the implied insult. "Stand by for the next three days. If it's what I think

it is, it's the biggest story since the Danes raided Westminster—or, or since the Dutch made a mess of the Medway."

"And what do you think it is?"

"That," said Scott pensively, "still needs a spot or two of clarification."

"It mostly does."

"Don't be so damned sniffy," said Scott. "Have I ever let you down with a big story yet? Look here, don't let the old man send you out of town for the next three days, and don't go on any of your confounded binges. It's the longest odds that I'll need your help pretty badly. You've got a couple of friends at the Admiralty, haven't you?"

"Yes, what do you want with them?"

"Guarantees of respectability for a start," said Scott. "Do you know them well enough to ask 'em to do things blindfold?"

"Perhaps."

"That," said Scott softly, "is just about what the doctor ordered. I may possibly want help from the Yard too. Look here, see your friends—write down their names for me, by the way—and tell 'em that I am reasonably honest, to be trusted with anything except strong drink and a pretty girl, and—and all the rest of it. You know what I mean, give 'em the word that if I'm in a hole you'd like 'em to help me out if it's consistent with decency and the King's Regulations and Admiralty Instructions. And then go on to the Yard and see Carter—he's a pal of yours."

"Carter's special branch," said Weeks quickly.

"That's right. Bright boy, move to the head of the form. Carter knows all about me—he's got me on a card index, I suspect. Tell him that there may be something doing, but don't let any of 'em drag out even the suspicion of a hint about that cable, unless you hear that there's been another yachting accident in the Thames Estuary—with three corpses."

"*Vigilate et orate* (Latin), or should it be *orare*. Anyway, I'll do my best; you wouldn't like me to look up an influential friend at Lambeth Palace and ask the archbishop to put in a bit of overtime?"

"If you had a friend at Lambeth Palace," said Scott ironically. He changed his tone suddenly. "I may be all wrong about this business, old man," he said soberly. "But I've a conviction it's the biggest thing I've ever been on in my life. I had a hunch of somewhat the same size about the White Mike business, you remember, and it came off. Well, I've the same thing again, and it's growing. Probably all my guesses are wrong—so wrong perhaps that we'll make damned fools of ourselves, but that isn't why I've asked you

to get your pals to stand by—you know that. Weeks, there was something so cold-blooded about that running down business that there must be something big—so big that we can't even imagine it yet—behind it. I don't suppose for a moment we can manage it ourselves, we're only going out to look, to see if we can't find out something—anything—that will give us an idea what on earth it all means. That's where you come in, when we've got a peg to hang things on. I'm taking Ann because—well, because I've got to take her. You know what she is. And she's the only one who would recognise that motor cruiser again—supposing it's still hanging about round the Thames. And I'm taking Ames although he says he's getting old, because you couldn't hold him back from a thing like this with steel hawsers once he was convinced that there was anything in it."

"And is he?"

"Well, he left for Leigh-on-Sea to charter a boat twenty minutes after we made fast at Gravesend. He said he knew a man there."

"*Audaces fortuna juvat*," said Weeks softly. "Latin again. Well, I've always said you'd never die in your bed. I'll tell the navy not to hang you at the yard-arm without consulting me. I suppose it's not possible for you to give me a rough indication of your immediate moves—not for publication."

"For your purposes I've gone to a friend's house in the country to recover from the shock of the accident. For your own knowledge I don't see that there's much I can help you with. Ames has gone to Leigh, with instructions to cover his tracks. Ann was salving all the salvable gear when we left and will take it by car to Leigh for the next trip. I hired a car for her. She has got to shake off any watches too. I'm leaving for Southend at once with a mixture of bus and taxi, and district railway. If Ames has got a ship, we'll sail as soon as we can get the stores and gear on board. I'll wire you her name and description."

"Where do you sail to?"

"Anywhere to seaward of the Nore. I can't say more than that. I'd like to spend to-night loafing round the Red Sand and the Oaze Deep, and I don't think I'll use my lights either."

"Ah, well, I don't suppose you can say fairer than that. I suppose you wouldn't mind telling me where the Oaze Deep is?"

"First leg of the deep sea steamer channel to the east and south. Call it ten miles east and a little south of Southend Pier. Is that clear?"

"Reasonable," said Weeks. "Reasonable. Well, I suppose

I must let my other work go hang and make a sensation out of you. I suspect you're holding back a lot on me, but nobody ever tells me the truth—and I had such a nice murder and suicide to spread myself on—awful waste of good stuff."

"To blazes with your other work," said Scott coarsely. "And talking of other work, what's that on the bills about 'Sensational Hitler Speech'?"

"All Hitler's speeches are sensational," said Weeks lazily. "*Aut Cæsar aut Nullus.*"

"Yes, but what's it about?"

"I'm a crime reporter, not a diplomatic correspondent, what are any of his speeches about, anyway? Hitler?"

"The *Star* had something about 'Grave German Situation.'"

"It often has," said Weeks airily. "Oh, I forgot, you've been out of town for three days. Let me see, there have been five crises, two ruptures, a severance and a demarché or so since you left. We don't like Germany any more, or Germany doesn't like us any more. Oh, yes, I remember, and the League of Nations is a broken reed. I read that in a Beaverbrook paper."

"But is there anything new?"

"There never is," said Weeks. "It's always the same old stuff rehashed, except when it comes to the execution of Russian notabilities. They always seem to raise a new crop there somehow. Like their hash fresh perhaps."

"But Germany . . ." said Scott thoughtfully.

"Well, it's been going on for three years or so now, you ought to know something about it, you can read. There's been rather a lot of useless verbiage the last few days. Macnaughton was in here yesterday, condescending to lighten our gloom by his sunny presence, and he said that 'things were going from bad to worse.' I said that I hoped that the statesmen would leave no stone unturned, and he said that I was a flaneur, fiddling while Rome was burning. I said that I didn't know whether flaneurs could fiddle."

"And then?"

"He went away. He said he was going to a Foreign Office conference, but he was probably going to the Cheshire Cheese."

"Macnaughton doesn't often talk of political futures," said Scott very slowly. "That's how he made his reputation. By not talking. Can you remember exactly what he said?"

"He said, 'You can frivel as much as you like, you fellows, but there's something up . . . things have been going from bad to worse the last forty-eight hours.' Then I said my little piece, and he got snooty and went away."

"He would," said Scott abstractedly. "That's his trouble. No sense of humour and an over-fed dignity—but he knows

his stuff. He's about the best diplomatic man the *Tribune's* ever had. And he doesn't commit himself—unless he's—damned certain." He sat in silence for three minutes, while Weeks, on his back on the bed, whistled faintly. At the end of that time he rose. "Well, I'm going. See you when it's all over."

"Go with God," said Weeks, waving a languid hand from the bed. "I forget the German for it."

Scott turned at the door. "You think I'm making a fool of myself," he said slowly. "I'm not, you know. I don't care what you think, though, as long as you back me up when I need it—and I will need it."

"Scott O'hara, you take life too seriously. You ought to be like me, don't take anything seriously till it happens—and not then, either. Good hunting."

Scott grinned at him and went. Weeks had only two moods, they served him for weeks at a time—flippant and morose. Even McCabe the dour news editor had been known to greet him on a Sunday evening with, "What's it going to be this week—the tragic muse?"

The lift came up and took him down, depositing him in the carpeted splendours of the hall of the block of flats in which Weeks lived when he wasn't following crime stories. Conscientiously cautious, Scott ignored the front entrance, found a service door at the end of a corridor, and slipped out by that. Twenty minutes later he was settled in a Southend train with a pile of newspapers by his side.

He worked through them carefully as the train slid out through the grim backyards of the East End. Row after row the chimney pots went by. There were sudden vistas of grey gardens, and line after tangled line of wireless aerials. They crossed streets and looked down quick opening lanes of traffic, red buses, tram cars, crowded pavements. The houses grew less dense, there were glimpses of distant shipping, patches of open, cranes standing high against warehouses, tall flour mills and grain elevators.

Scott glanced at it all half-consciously in the intervals of his reading. The papers yielded little. Crises were the stuff of the breakfast table in these days of diplomatic intolerance, in this new crisis there was nothing to mark any real departure from those innumerable forgotten ones. There were the same alarms, the same drums beating, the same flags flying. The speech itself reiterated ancient principles, flung threats that were already old in their use, made boasts that had lost their force by too frequent overstatement.

They were out in the green of the Essex flats before Scott found, in *The Times*, a paragraph that seemed to carry more than ordinary weight. It related to heavy production from

a certain group of factories in the Essen district. Dimly he seemed to remember Macnaughton telling him, months past, that this, outside Krupps, was the most important group of factories in the Reich. It produced bomb fuses mainly, and special detonators. The paragraph seemed to mean more than all the speeches, all the polemics of the leader writers, the headlines of the gutter papers.

Scott frowned over it. By itself it seemed hardly enough to justify Macnaughton's remarks. With anybody else there might have been no real significance in the remarks, but with Macnaughton—who prided himself on never making alarmist prophecies, who was as economical of words as the proverbial Aberdonian of silver—every statement had significance. They reached Benfleet and he was still worrying about it. The water of the creek thrust it out of his mind, however; he turned his attention to more pressing problems. The train took the straight flat stretch to Leigh at speed, at that station, obeying a sudden impulse, he got out. He was the only passenger.

As he walked off the platform he nodded to himself, at anyrate he was not followed. If there had ever been any pursuit, somewhere or other he had shaken it off.

Within ten minutes he found Ann, staggering under two enormous carrier-bags outside a grocer's shop.

"We've got her," said Ann without preamble. "She's a bit of a cow, name of *Shannon*. She's a fifty-fifty motor sailer . . ."

"Size?"

"Something under twenty tons."

"Fifty-fifty—I wonder."

"So do I. More likely seventy-five twenty-five."

"And which is the seventy-five, the motor or the sail?"

"Whichever one you aren't using," said Ann caustically.

"They mostly are. Still, she's not as bad as some, we'll probably get to like her in time. She's a ketch, and she draws only four foot six, which is an advantage."

"Doesn't sound too bad. Have you got all you want yet? This stuff weighs a ton."

"Bread, methylated spirits, two gallons of paraffin, electric bulbs, a packet of primus prickers, half a dozen assorted shackles and a lot of muckings for the skipper. He's filling up with water and petrol. We've got the luck of the tide, it'll be full in twenty minutes. Here's an oil shop."

Swiftly they made their purchases. Scott suborned a small boy into carrying one of the parcels. The oil shop boy carried the paraffin. They reached the shore in a little procession. Well off the shore lay a blue ketch, she was sturdy rather than graceful, with an air of purpose about

her, a you-be-damnedness that was oddly attractive. An outboard dinghy was coming ashore from her.

"They moved her out into deep water as soon as she floated," said Ann. "We didn't know what time you'd get here, and we didn't want to lose the tide if we could help it. The skipper moves things when he makes up his mind. He's had three men working on her all the morning. They scrubbed her when she was on the sand, and they've caulked a leaky seam in the decks, and he drained both the water tanks and had a man to overhaul the engine. What do you think of her?"

"I like her from here," said Scott. "I like that blue. Useful colour at night, and in the twilight. How does she take the ground?"

"Well," said Ann, "a bit too well for her sailing powers, I think."

"We're not in the Fastnet race," said Scott cheerfully. "It's a fault on the good side, we may need it."

"I've forgotten matches," said Ann dramatically.

Scott gave the small boy half a crown. "Cut back and get two packets—packets, not boxes. Make it snappy, son."

As the boy left them, Ann turned to Scott. "Well?" she said.

"Very well," said Scott. "Weeks will do everything. He'll warn people at the Admiralty and the Yard, and he'll get the story used properly."

"Dear old Weeks, was he very gloomy?"

"Fair to middling, mostly flippant."

"Macnaughton says there's trouble ahead . . ."

"Meaning?"

"Germany . . . there's another crisis."

"There always is."

"There's something in it this time."

"And what do you think?"

"I don't think anything," said Scott. "I'm not allowing myself to think at the moment. But I'm damned well going to find out the meaning of that length of cable—and that infernal canister at the end of it."

"Amen," said Ann.

CHAPTER VI

"Good old Sarfend," said Scott waving his arm cheerfully to the paddle steamer full of trippers that crossed their bows, heading in for the pier. "I knew a Gravesend pilot once who said that the only thing that gave him grey hairs on the river was coming past this place at night when the illuminations were on. He said you had to stop and pick these things out of your teeth every half-mile or so. Well, folk, I've told you all I know about the international situation—and a good deal that I've guessed, and it's four o'clock. We damn' near missed that tide with your engine muckings, skipper, anyway it's time we set watches. The question is, how?"

"Three watches," said Ann promptly. "Four hours each."

Ames removed his eternal pipe. "Nope," he said. "Scott and I will keep watch and watch, and you can take a spell with either of us when you like."

Scott pulled his mouth down and waited for the explosion. None came, instead Ann said sweetly, "I think I love you best when you're Victorian, Uncle Henry. I feel I ought to wear a bustle. Don't take any notice of him, Scott. Four hours or three."

"We've got to keep a pretty sharp look out while we're on deck," said Scott. "I think two will be enough. Two hours on, four off; give us time to get a bit of sleep."

Ames grunted a non-committal sort of grunt. Scott took it blandly for assent. My idea at the moment is to stand straight out for the Mouse and the Barrow Deep as if we were going north—for Harwick or somewhere. The courses are easy enough, and we ought to make the Mouse lightship, and the change, of course, at the change of the first watch. We're doing roughly five and a half, I should say, and that ought to bring us to the Mid Barrow light at eight o'clock. That's the next change. It ought to be dark by then, and we can turn short of the light and drowse our navigation lights. I don't think for a moment that we're being followed—but we're going to carry on just as if we are. Then"—he traced with his forefinger over the outspread chart—"then, if the wind holds from the north'ard, I'm going to make sail, cut out the engine, and stand back by Number Four buoy here, across the tail of the sand—there'll be plenty of water—and then go up by Shivering Sand to the Oaze Deep. If we've no lights and no motor, it's long odds we'll see anything before it sees us. If there's any point in it, we can take the sail off her and drift in with the tide, it'll be making again

by then. With the sail off her and this blue hull, she'll be invisible to anything without a searchlight. Got it?"

"Seems simple," said Ames gruffly. "And what do you expect to see?"

"God knows," said Scott cheerfully. "If I knew I wouldn't be going there for to look, for to admire . . ."

"I'll take the first watch," said Ann. "It'll be best that way, Uncle Henry and I both had a bit of sleep this morning when we were coming up. This morning—Goodness, Scott, it seems like a week ago. Was it only this morning—last night that it happened? It seems hardly . . ."

"Anything's possible," said Ames. "Told you that before. I'll take the second watch. This wind will hold all right. Might even freshen a bit at sundown."

"Bless you, crew," said Scott, yawning. "God, I didn't know I was so tired. It's all your fault talking about it. Skipper, I'll bring up some supper when I relieve you. Ann, you'd better have a bite now. No? All right, you know your own innards. Keep a lookout for Sarfend boats and any blighter who may look like the blighter who blighted us. Good-night, all."

He slid down the cabin hatch and rummaged among the bedding of a strange new bunk.

Ames stayed on deck for a minute or two longer. "Don't believe there's anything to see," he said once. "Still, it keeps him happy."

Ann smiled at him over the tiller. "You're fond of him, aren't you, Uncle Henry?"

"Who, him?" Captain Ames laughed scornfully. "He's only book learning and bounce."

Ann smiled again. "Go below and sleep," she said softly. "You're a wicked old bear."

"Too old for this sort of job," said Ames, sorting himself together. "You children ought to realise that, instead of running me round the Thames Estuary looking for trouble."

"Go to bed," said Ann.

She watched him follow Scott, and turned her attention to the sea again.

They were clear now of the rabble of Southend pleasure boats. To seaward there was a frieze of redsailed barges, working across the pale turquoise of the eastern sky. Gulls quarrelled over a patch of floatsam on the water, and beyond them was a yacht with a brilliant white mains'l and a scarlet jib. The water was yellow overside, and green beyond them, and where the channels shoaled it was yellow again like amber seen through green gauze, and where the sand showed it was the colour of old ivory, with brown stains like ivory statues that have stood too long above the incense lamps.

In the middle of all the picture was a coaster; she was drab perhaps, and ordinary, but the low sun brightened her paint-work, and the sky blazoned the red of her funnel, and the smoke from it curled off to leeward with the slow, stately curves of a Greek vase.

It was astonishingly peaceful. Almost unconsciously Ann turned her eyes away from the course and looked down over the river to Sheerness. But the naval port was hidden under a haze of smoke, and out of it there stood only the grim outlines of a battleship, and the round grey bulk of the martello tower on the boom.

Slowly they drew into the open waters. The Kentish shores disappeared altogether in a thin haze. The wind dropped till the water was almost calm, and the fairway buoys and the high beacon posts of the measured mile stood out sharply against the light.

The sun was very low by the time they made the Mouse. The red hull of the lightship glowed in the light of it. The thin haze seemed to be settling down to seaward now, making a lavender thickness above the horizon, and cutting down the visibility by a mile or two. Against it the lightship was bright, the red of the hull, the red of the lantern tower, the white of the letters "MOUSE" that spreadeagled along her sides were curiously, almost ominously brilliant.

Ann looked at her wrist-watch as she passed the lightship. A man in his shirt sleeves took his pipe from his mouth and waved to her. She waved back. The smoke of his pipe—she was close enough to see it—went upwards in the still air. The peace was perfect.

When she had jotted down the time in the deck log, she altered course. They had made a little on the estimated time, and it still lacked ten minutes to the hour. After another minute or two, however, she heard movement below and the roar of the primus.

Five minutes later Ames's head thrust up through the companion-way. "Kettle's boilin', Ann. Shall I make the tea, or will you?"

It was ten minutes past six before they had finished their tea, and Ames took over.

"D'you want the course, Uncle Henry?" she asked mischievously as she went below.

"Me—me that's been working in and out of this damned Channel man and boy for forty years? Want the course. Be asking me if I wear wool next my skin just now."

The sun set, rich and red through the haze, and as it dipped the night wind came up, and Captain Ames stretched through the hatch and reached for his coat. The wind came rippling the still water, cutting grey furrows first in the turquoise, and

waking the gulls on the sand to sudden noisy life. From grey furrows it spread to wide patches that were blue, shot with amethyst. Then it blew steadily, a gentle, easy wind. They made the Mid Barrow lightship at twenty to eight, though Captain Ames had slowed the steady motor. Off the brilliant beam the old man put the ship round, till she headed south-west-by-south. Then, switching off the motor, he ran quickly forward and started to hoist the jib.

Before he had got his hands to the halliards he heard Scott's voice behind him. "What the hell?"

"You go to sleep again, 't isn't your watch yet," said Ames over his shoulder as he sweated home the halliard.

Scott disregarded the injunction. He came up behind Ames, who was searching for the staysail halliard. "Made good time, haven't we?"

"Reckon we misjudged her," said Ames. "She slips along once she gets going. I shut her down quite a bit too.

"We'll need it," said Scott abruptly.

"Quiet and peaceful enough, isn't it?" Ames waved his hand largely into the darkness. "Damned little moving on the river too." Swiftly and methodically they made sail. Scott had gone round the gear before they sailed, familiarising himself with the lie of things. Ames seemed to find the ropes by instinct in the dark. Between them they managed well.

The *Shannon* began to slip through the dark river, with an increasing purr and ripple of water under her bows. "Ann, she put some supper ready for you, before she turned in," said Ames. "You go below and eat. I'll hold on till you're through. Do you want the lights out now? Better wait till that coal boat's gone by. Otherwise he'll shout at you. Don't know that I like this idea of going about without lights myself. Don't like it at all."

"Well, the lights brought 'em last night," said Scott. "Do you want 'em round again? Well, then."

He came up still eating, a vast hunk of bread and ham in his hand. "How's the tide?"

"Slack, as near as makes no difference. It'll set you up on the tail of the sand after a while, but there's plenty to float you. No. 4 buoy's a red flash. You ought to see it inside ten minutes if she holds this gait. Still a bit thick in patches, though, otherwise we'd have seen it already. Keep her as she goes. Good-night to you."

He went down. Scott in turn was left alone on the deck of the little ship, with only the slap and murmur of the water under her bows for company.

The night was very dark. That was the haze. If it cleared things would be better, though there was no moon.

There was nothing to do save to hold the *Shannon* on her course and watch for the red flicker of the buoy. She was not fast in light airs, that was abundantly certain, but it was also fairly certain already that she sailed like a ship, and not like a dressed-up dumb barge. She held her course well even when Scott took his hand off the tiller.

He stared ahead watching almost anxiously for the loom of the buoy.

He found it at last, a pinprick of red in the night, low down and a little off the course he was laying. He straightened her up for it, glad of the excuse to fiddle for a minute or two with the sheets. Then he settled back to his seat again. The wind was so light that he could scarcely feel the tiller.

There was nothing to do now except think. He began to run over every circumstance of their discovery of the cable, when he had exhausted that he went over the collision, chewing over every minute detail from the first crash to their arrival at Gravesend.

Nothing new came out of it, only a sense of helplessness, of frustration. A sudden bitter realisation of the immensity of the Estuary waters, the endlessness of the possibilities, the weakness of their force, and the completeness of their ignorance. Round him in the haze he could see a light barely two miles away. The lightships would be visible perhaps five or six miles, but only as pinpricks in the gloom. Overside he could see almost nothing. A battleship with her lights out might pass him at a quarter of a mile—and he would know nothing of her passing.

Even if the mist cleared what could he expect to see? The cable was down. Supposing whatever it represented was already accomplished. Suppose the work was done. How hopeless it was. He could not even imagine what the thing was for, what it represented, what harm it could do. What folly then to try to find out—with an old man and girl—what it meant. Weeks was right, he ought to have gone straight to the Admiralty and laid the facts before them. Ames had plumped for that too. Only he had held out against it. Why? A little perhaps because he was afraid of making a fool of himself; of being told that it was a new leader cable, or something to do with target practice or . . . Yes, there was something of that in his reasons, and yet not everything. Ann must have felt something of what he felt; that this was a job they must work out for themselves, a risk they must run themselves, a danger they must face.

He felt suddenly heartened.

The wind freshened. The night seemed a little clearer.

They were slipping along well now. He took a quick cast of the lead and got five fathoms. The next cast got five and a half. They were moving off the edge of the shoal into the deep water.

He swung her round again, heading up for London River. There was a boat coming towards them, two white lights at her masthead—a tug, towing a spoil barge to the disposal grounds in the Black Deep. Astern, as he glanced up towards the Edinburgh light, was a mate of the tug, a homeward-bounder with his sludge hopper empty, going back up the river to Barking outfall for another load.

The first one would pass fairly close to him. Scott smiled to himself. She would test his invisibility. If a rude and angry hail came from the bridge of the tug he would know that too much reliance was not to be placed upon it.

No hail came.

Slowly they slipped up the deep water. The wind fell light for a while, and the ship barely carried steerageway. Then it freshened for a while, but barely enough to make her heel. More tugs passed them, and an inward-bound liner from the south. A barge passed too, close to them, sliding almost across their bows, but no hail came from her either.

The Knob light came up, the white light on the top of the buoy winking and swaying as Scott passed close beside it, the boom of the bell beating out lazily across the silence of the night as the wash of the liner swung the sleepy clappers.

Shivering Sand winked red beyond. The tide was taking them up faster now. The wind freshened again for a while. Astern of them the buoy boomed like a cathedral tower. They made Shivering Sand and the red flash from the buoy splashed lurid across their sails, so close did Scott take her.

The wind had dropped again. Scott left the helm, and going amidships began to get ready the gear for taking the sail off her. When everything was clear he ran forward and lowered the headsails. Before they were properly down Ann was on deck. Together they dropped the mainsail, tied it in two places with robands so that it was almost ready for hoisting again, and, coming aft, dropped the mizen.

The yacht headed in for a minute or two, holding the course then, very slowly, very gravely, she swung round in a complete circle till her bows pointed to the red wink of Shivering Sand, and her stern upstream. Scott made the last lashing fast and went back to the cockpit with Ann. For a long two minutes he watched the red light and the white light of the Knob beyond. At length he said, "We'll do. The wind is taking us down a little, but it doesn't amount to much. I suppose we'll swing round and back again all the time. If Uncle Henry's right about the run of the tide here—"

and he ought to be—it'll take us the best part of three hours to get through the Oaze. Say about one o'clock. If there's anything happening in the Oaze, it ought to be happening round about now, or from now onward. Keep your ears open, my child." He began to fold sail covers and an odd tarpaulin and lay them on the floor of the cockpit.

"What are you doing?" demanded Ann.

"My bed," said Scott simply.

"It'll be cold round about midnight."

"*Moi* he-man (French), as Weeks would say, I'll get a couple of blankets up."

"Don't you trust me?"

"So much that if you don't make too much noise I shall go to sleep," said Scott. "Don't rail at me, curb your natural shrewishness, you know how sound travels across water. Do you realise, Ann, that unless we make a noise, they won't hear anything of us even if they have patent listening gear. No motor, not even the hiss of a bow wave. And they won't see us without a searchlight, and they can hardly use a searchlight. So unless we give ourselves away we've got the advantage every time."

"I wonder who 'they' are."

"That, my dear, is the purpose of our being here. You may go on wondering all through your watch. Hack me in the ribs if you see anything or hear anything, or even if you imagine anything. And don't wake me when you change watches with Uncle Henry, or I'll break down and cry."

He settled himself into the blankets.

Ann wedged herself into a corner of the cockpit, put the night glasses close to hand, and stared out into the darkness. The ship was swinging again; the wind had caught her stern, and she moved gradually until her bows pointed almost upsteam again. In that position, slightly aslant the tide, she went slowly onward. On the weather side the wind ripple made a little chattering noise, a friendly babble of nothing at all. High up on the mast a halliard thrummed every now and again, a little noise that matched the water babble—pit, pit, pit, pit, pit, and then silence. Then pit, pit, again. Then the drift of air that had started it passed them, and it died away, the water babble almost died with it.

There was little sound in the outer night. The bell buoy still carried very faintly across the water, the note was high now, distorted by distance into a whine rather than the deep clangour of the metal. Almost as far away she could hear a propeller beating, a quick thud, thud, thud. It was upwind of her and with the night glasses she hunted until she found the green sidelight of a ship passing through the Knob Channel

into the Barrow. For a while she puzzled over the loudness of the sound and then realised suddenly that she must be travelling light, with her propeller half out of the water and beating like a flail.

Still further away, to the eastward, a whistle blew, two long blasts, followed by silence. Five minutes later a tug syren ran up its infernal scale once, like a child wailing in its sleep, and made no other sound.

The wind dropped altogether, even the lap of water against the sides ceased. The silence seemed to close in on the little ship. Ann felt that she was floating at the bottom of a black pool. The flash of the winking Estuary lights seemed outside the pool, reminders—no more than that, of a light that could never be attained again. The silence pressed on her. The beating propeller had gone, fading out into the emptiness like a heart ceasing to beat. Around them there was nothing, it was as if something had cut them off from the world, something had pushed life away from them, so that they floated alone in a lost and lonely place with no contact with the realities, no link with the world save the mocking lights on the outer edge of their pool of darkness.

The minutes dragged by. So still was it that she could hear Ames in the berth below, turning over and grunting in his sleep. She could hear Scott's breathing. Could hear, almost, her own heart beating.

She looked at her watch. It was close on eleven. For all the silence, for all the darkness, the watch was racing by. The yacht was swinging again. Wind blew cold on her cheek. The halliard thrummed against the mast again, and very far away a bird called. The call came nearer, and nearer still. She heard the strong beat of wings in the sky above her. It had clouded over in Ames's watch, but the clouds began to break now. They showed first one star and then a score, and a planet came out low down to the eastward and trailed a star path over the water. The wall of blackness seemed to be dissolving, the lights were more tangible, more real. The wind grew stronger. The lightship at the Nore, seen like a dim ghost of a light through the haze, was quite suddenly clear and brilliant. South of it shore lights began to show along the Isle of Sheppey. They showed as a faint glow under the darkness of the night sky, with here and there a bright point in it, like a star fallen and resting on the rim of the sea.

They were driving over towards the Red Sand now, the wind was drifting them across the channel. Ann went forward, groped for the lead on the cabin top, and dropping it over the side got a rough sounding. She got eight fathoms. No need to wake Scott yet. She looked at her watch.

Twenty-past eleven already. She had seen nothing, heard nothing; such shipping as used the channels, passed to and fro upon its lawful occasions, all lights burning. Actually there had been little traffic since she took over. An oil tanker, outward bound, had passed her, rocking the little boat with her wash. An inward-bound tramp, very deep in the water judging by her lights, had gone by the best part of a mile away. A tug and two barges and a big sludge hopper had also slipped by.

There was nothing in sight now. Ann went back to her seat. The wind seemed to be dropping, and there was still plenty of water below them. There was no need to worry.

Very slowly the breeze died again. Stillness came back to the water. The rustle and chop of the wavelets slackened. The yacht swung gravely round again, sweeping her bowsprit past the lights at the Nore till it pointed gravely to the winking Mouse.

The absolute silence of the Estuary closed over them once more. Ann sat, with her chin on her elbows, staring at the far brightness of the Nore. Waiting—waiting—waiting.

For twenty minutes there was absolute soundlessness. It was as if all the Estuary had gone to sleep. Nothing passed, no new lights showed, the water itself was silent as a sheet of marble. Flickering lights came off it, but no sound. Not even a fish leapt. The whole world seemed silent, breathless, waiting.

And then, very thin but absolutely clear across the water came the clang of metal on metal, and instantly on the clang a voice—very thin too, very far away, but carrying with the perfection of sound across a silent sea.

It said one word only: "*Zehn.*"

There was a little pause and another voice answered it. The first words were unintelligible then Ann heard, sharply, "*Achtung, achtung!*"

Bending down, she grasped Scott's shoulder and shook him.

CHAPTER VII

INSTANTLY Scott was on his knees on the seat beside her. "What?" he demanded, almost breathing the word.

Again the voice came, "*Sorgfältig.*"

Again there was the little pause, and then a new voice called, "*Jetzt.*"

There was a very faint splash, and a quick rasping sound. It lasted for perhaps two seconds, then the silence closed down again.

Scott turned away from the girl and, groping swiftly, put his hand on the case of the hand-bearing compass. Swiftly and methodically he took a bearing of the Mouse; turning, he took a second of the Nore and a third of the Girdler. He groped in his pocket for pencil and paper, scribbled them down in the darkness and turning again, faced the direction from which the voices had come. He took the bearing of that too. It could be no more than approximate, but it might serve. For a long three minutes he waited, but no further sounds came. He put his lips to the girl's ear. "Anything else?"

"They'd just started," said Ann softly. "I heard the man say, '*Zehn.*' And then another man said, '*Achtung.*' I couldn't make out the rest. There was a little bang too, metal on metal. Nothing else."

"Wake Ames."

Ann dropped down the ladder instantly. Scott heard a faint scuffle and a whisper. No more sound came from the water. Ames came up the ladder soundlessly. Ann followed him. The three of them stood, straining their ears. The silence was absolute again. So perfect that it almost hurt. There was no breath of wind, no rustle of wavelets on the sands. No water noise.

Minute after minute went by. Scott's scalp began to ache. Muscles of which he had not been conscious, close against the bone behind his ears, hurt. Still no sound came.

Still they listened. Air blew against their faces, as if the wind was essaying to rise again. Ripples slapped against the sheer planking. Then suddenly the air was full of thin, attenuated sound. Distant sound. A rustle that began sharply, became confused, and straightened out into a susurrus like distant rapids on a quiet river.

Scott had the night glasses. With them fixed to his eyes he swept backwards and forwards across the narrow arc from whence the noise came. But no shape swam into the glasses to reward him.

It was Ann who first saw something. She said, "The Sheerness lights, quick. Far end."

Scott swung his glasses. The end lights of the lowlying line were disappearing, wiped out by a low shadow. Even with the glasses he could barely see, but slowly something crept past the lights, licking them out as it passed, clearing them so that they shone bright again as it progressed. A second shadow followed. It seemed longer than the first. Then it seemed broken. It was impossible to be certain. That, too, passed the brightest of the lights and disappeared, swallowed absolutely into the night, absorbed by the darkness.

Ames said, "Shall I start the motor?"

Scott grunted. "No use. They're too fast for us. I wonder what sort of motors——"

"Can't hear a sound," said Ames. "What we do hear is propeller thresh—and bow-waves, perhaps. Nothing else. Wind's coming through again. Shall we get the cloths on her?"

"They'd hear the blocks creaking. We must oil 'em all to-morrow. No, we'll go on drifting. They're going off now, moving east."

"Motor boat!" said Ann softly.

"You've got good ears," said Scott, whispering, "Where?"

"Up near the West Oaze buoy, I think. Can't you hear it?"

They listened again, straining their ears. Very faintly the purr of a distant engine came across to them. The wind was freshening steadily now, the perfect hearing conditions were gone, they could no longer hear the thresh of the distant propellers.

Scott said, "Were there three boats? I couldn't be certain."

"Two," said Ann.

"Three, I think," said Ames. "If the wind doesn't get up we'll get their wash in a little. Tell then—perhaps."

The wind went on freshening. The halliard began to drum on the wood of the mast. For'ard a fold of the foresail blew out and began to flap with a soft, insistent noise. Ann went forward unbidden and made it fast again. The motor boat was drawing nearer, they could see her lights, a tri-coloured lantern on a stumpy mast. The noise of her was across the wind from them, but it grew rapidly more clear.

Ames said, after a little—they still spoke in whispers, "Rather like our friend of last night?"

"I was thinking that," said Scott.

"It's the same type of engine," said Ann decidedly.

"There's an odd, high note."

"Better stand by the starter," said Scott softly. "We're

probably wrong, but there's no sense in not taking precautions. If she holds her course she should pass clear of us by a quarter of a mile, but if she doesn't . . ."

Ames dropped below.

Scott turned, and began to sweep the water across the Red Sand with his glasses. They could hear nothing at all now from that direction. He could see nothing either. Ann turned and stared with him. "You watch our other friend," said Scott quickly. "If he alters course at all tell me."

The yacht began to swing again, curling aimlessly round. Scott pivoted where he sat till the masts got in his line of vision. Then he stepped out of the cockpit. Gradually she made her full circle and settled down again.

Ann said, "He's turning a little, heading away."

"Bless him," said Scott, still searching urgently in the dark.

Five minutes later she said, "He's turning back towards us more."

"Blast him," said Scott cheerfully.

Three minutes later he asked, "What's he doing?"

"Holding steady," said Ann. "He'll pass us. Scott, it's last night's boat—or her sister ship. I'd know that engine again."

"Good," said Scott. "Watch him."

There was a pause, the noise of the engine came nearer and nearer. Ann said breathlessly after a little, "He's turning again, Scott. He'll pass closer—much closer."

"Is he heading for us?"

"Almost."

Scott stepped to the companion-hatch and said softly, "Stand by. Pass up my automatic, it's on the instrument shelf."

He took the gun, slipped it in his pocket, glanced at the oncoming boat and turned again to search the darkness to the south.

Steadily the roar of the engines was clearer and clearer. The yacht swung again, turning slowly till her bows pointed almost straight at the stranger's lights. Scott changed position again to watch the south. Ann, with her eyes on the stranger, felt her heart beginning to beat—louder and louder, faster and faster. She was shivering, she had to keep her hands tightly clenched to check the shiver. The lights were very close now, if the stranger held his course he would pass less than twenty yards away. She said once. "He's getting close, Scott?"

"Blast him," said Scott without turning round. "And damn his noise."

Closer and closer. She could see other lights now, faint lights through side ports, and a glow from a deck saloon. The

trembling was almost uncontrollable now. Her mouth was dry. Her eyes were burning.

"Scott," she began again, then she hesitated. The lights had altered. The alteration went on, quickened. The stranger was turning, heading away, swinging his bows round to the north-east to cross the Oaze on another long diagonal.

"Yes?"

"He's altered course away from us," said Ann with a sudden, enormous relief. The trembling stopped, her hands slowly opened out again.

"Excellent," said Scott.

They waited in the cockpit for another five minutes, but nothing happened. At the end of that time Scott went to the companion-hatch. "All clear, I think, better come up again."

When Ames reached the deck he said, "I think we'll get the head-sails up. If we hoist 'em slowly there oughtn't to be much noise. Not that I think it matters now, I fancy it's all over for the night."

"Who do you——" began Ann.

"Talk afterwards," said Scott. "I don't want to waste this spot of wind, it's been fitful all the night, and I don't suppose it'll steady down now."

They got the head-sails up and followed them with the mizen. Under control again, the little ship headed quietly up the river. "That swinging about gave me the jitters," said Scott softly.

"What's the time, folks?"

"Quarter-past twelve," said Ann.

"Your watch, skipper. Ann, go to bed, there won't be any more fun. We'll puzzle it all out in the morning."

He settled himself once more in his nest of blankets and sail covers.

The light wind drifted them up through the Oaze Deep, past the white flash of the West Oaze buoy and into the Nore. It dropped well before they made the lightship, but the tide was still with them. Ames, watching with all the intentness of the professional seaman, saw nothing and heard nothing, and when at the end of his watch, at two o'clock, he stooped down and woke Scott, it was to report an absolute blank.

Scott gathered himself together sleepily. "'Tisn't exactly a howling gale," he said, yawning. "How far are we off, d'you reckon?" He nodded towards the brilliance of the Nore lightship.

"Best part of a mile," said Ames cautiously. "What are you going to do now? Go back?"

"Two hours till dawn," said Scott. "No, I don't think we'll go back. I think it's all over for the night."

"How can you tell?"

"Can't," said Scott. "It's just guesswork. It's all guesswork for that matter. Still, I think they were pushing off when we saw them. They'd have had good time to get clear of the last of the lightships before daylight. Start up the engine before you turn in, skipper, I'll take her in and anchor her in a nice safe place with lots of witnesses about. I won't want you again."

Dew fell heavily as they went past the light. Scott, with the motor pulsing beneath him, and his navigation lights bright in the darkness, headed straight for Southend pier.

Nothing disturbed the passage. Twice the wash of ships heading up the river tumbled them violently. Once they ran close past a tug with the inevitable deep-laden hopper in tow. Once they passed—but a clear half-mile away—a small motor cruiser heading to seaward.

Scott took her close in past the end of Southend pier, rounded to on the western side, and, threading a somewhat precarious way through the moored yachts, switched off the engine. As they lost way he took a quick sounding, grunted with satisfaction, and let go the anchor.

Methodically he stowed the sails, hoisted the riding light, and then went sleepily below.

As he turned in to his bunk he was still puzzling over the happenings of the night. He fell asleep with the puzzles still unsolved.

CHAPTER VIII

"WHAT do you think they were doing, Scott?" asked Ann lazily from her bunk.

"Search me. What do *you* think they were doing, skipper? You're the professional seaman among us, you ought to know."

"Journalists know everything," said Ames. "Taking the sounds for what they were worth, I should say that they were shooting a trawl as likely as anything."

"Nothing will induce him to look on the dark side," said Scott. "Is anybody going to get up and cook a bacon and an egg or so?"

"No," said Ann.

"Well, then, let's starve. Skipper, I told you there was something up—something that was not smuggling. Now I've proved it to you. What do you do next?"

"Don't see that you've proved anything," said Ames stubbornly. "How do you know they're not still smugglers?"

Scott sighed deeply. "Some people . . ." he began, and then thought better of it. Instead he said, "I've laid off the bearings I took last night when we first heard the voices. I make it that we were almost exactly half a mile to the north of the Red Sand Buoy."

"Has it a light?" asked Ann.

"That's the east Red Sand," said Scott. "The white light almost between us and the Girdler when we heard them."

Ann nodded.

"From the rough bearing I got, they must have been well to the westward of the buoy, and the other side of it."

"Doubt if the voices would have carried as far," said Ames.

"Why shouldn't they have been this side of it?"

"*Zehn* means ten," said Scott. "It must have been a sounding, and the shoal water's the other side of the buoy."

"There's no ten fathom water t'other side of the Red Sand buoy," said Ames deliberately.

"Metres, not fathoms," said Scott placidly. "This is where I place our little friends, and allowing for a mild error each way, it would put them about right for the Sheerness lights as we saw them. Now what in the name of Mike were they doing there?"

"How do ships come out of Sheerness?" said Ann. It was more a statement than a question.

"The Little Nore, the Great Nore, and the Oaze Deep." Scott recited the list slowly and with emphasis. "I've been thinking along the same lines myself."

"Meaning a minefield in the fairway," said Ames explosively. "Nonsense."

"It might not be a minefield," said Scott slowly. "But if it was, why nonsense?"

"You've been on the river five days now," said Ames heavily. "You'll have noticed the traffic, maybe. How long do you think a minefield would last without being noticed? Two hours?"

"That's a point," said Scott. "But I don't think it's the right point. If you're praying this morning, would you mind praying for a fog?"

"Why?" demanded Ann.

"Because as soon as there's a fog I'm going to trail a grapnel up and down to the westward of the Red Sand buoy till I find out."

"That's the first sensible thing you've suggested," said Ames, lumbering across the galley. "How many eggs, Ann?"

"Two, bless you," said Ann sleepily. "What are we going to do till there is a fog?"

"Plenty," said Scott shortly, marking in a little circle on the surface of the chart.

After working diligently with dividers and parallel rules, and a pencil and paper for twenty-five minutes, however, Scot showed no disposition to do anything energetic. He loafed about the ship, restowing gear and tidying things, and when he was bored with the cabin he went on deck and with Ames spent an hour oiling blocks and overhauling the running gear until he was sure that he had eliminated every squeak on the ship. At noon he decided suddenly to go ashore and crowded the other two into the dinghy.

They landed at the pier steps, and Scott went straight to the Customs office.

"You were reported coming in just before dawn," said the Customs officer. "But I saw it was only old Bill Harmes's boat—I know her."

"We chartered her yesterday," said Ames. "We're just mucking about—be in and out. May go round to Ramsgate, perhaps."

"Very nice for them as likes it," quoted the Customs man. "You haven't had an awful lot of wind."

"Her engine's all right, thank goodness," said Scott. "Do you want to come aboard or anything?"

"What for?" said the Customs man. "You haven't been foreign. Haven't had time for one thing." He laughed jovially.

"I thought you people were so suspicious." Scott laughed in his turn.

"When we have grounds, when we have grounds," said the other. "Things are quiet down the river lately, though."

"Dull," said Scott, shaking his head. "Look here, is there anywhere we can get a drink here, without going ashore?"

"Course there is," said the other. "Ho, ho, ho! I thought you didn't just come ashore to say you had a clean conscience."

"Could you join us?"

"Me? No, I'm on duty. Thanks all the same. Just round the corner from here you'll find an entrance."

They trooped out, a little noisily.

The bar was almost empty, and they were served at once.

"Anywhere I can get a paper here?" asked Scott.

The barman shook his head morosely. "Evenings won't 'ave come yet. Might get one in the Pier Master's office; morning paper. You off the lil' blue boat? Saw you come ashore."

"Any news in the mornings?" said Scott lazily.

"Plenty," said the barman ferociously, scrubbing at a beer pool on the mahogany. "I don't want any more plurry wars."

"Oh, there won't be a war," said Scott soothingly.

"Oh, won't there? German ambassador he hopped off to Berlin in a plane las' night."

"All German ambassadors are always hopping all over the place in planes," said Scott. "It's a habit. They think it impresses Downing Street. Perhaps it does."

"Not this time," said the barman gloomily. "Means war, this does."

"He's not been handed his papers?" said Scott sharply.

"Recalled to consult," said the barman. "Significant that is. I remember when the las' war broke out . . ." The barman had numerous reminiscences of the outbreak of the last war. They had finished their drinks and a new customer had come in before they were relieved.

As soon as they were outside Scott hunted for and found a public telephone. Weeks was not at the *Tribune* office, but a second call found him in the Press room at Bow Street.

Briefly Scott outlined the night's happenings. "Three boats working, one on the look-out. Remember that, and you've got the bearings written down? Right. Now tell us what the international news is. What's this about the German ambassador?"

"Nothing in it," said Weeks. "He's gone home to consult the Führer. Wait a minute, there's a joke there. What's the difference between a German ambassador and a Russian ambassador? Give up? Well, when the one's recalled he goes home to consult the Führer, and when the other's recalled he stays away and insults Stalin. Ho, ho, ho!"

"All right," said Scott. "Put in for the next vacancy on the *Punch* staff. Meanwhile, tell me how things are."

"They're about as bad as you thought they were," said Weeks more soberly. "And a little worse than Macnaughton said, and I still think it'll all blow over."

"Yes, but what is the news?"

"There isn't any," said Weeks. "No, I'm not trying to be funny. Barring the ambassador there isn't a single thing that anybody can take hold of, but all the diplomatics are walking round with long faces saying that things are going from bad to worse. Hard on the nerves it is, they aren't a cheery lot of coves at the best of times. The only one I've seen who said anything different was little Terblanche of *L'Soir*. He said things were going *de mal en pis* (French)."

"And there's nothing else?"

"Nothing."

"Well, that gives us a bit more time—perhaps. I'll ring you again if I can. To-morrow perhaps. Don't know. Lunching at the Press Club? Right. Goodbye." He rang off, Ann and Ames were gravely putting pennies into a pin

table. He prised them away. "Nice day for a sail," he said. "Come on."

They went back to the dinghy, shooed off the inevitable small boy and returned to the *Shannon*.

Scott was silent till they were aboard, not until Ann said, "Now tell us what all that was about?" did he come back to realities.

"Oh—yes. Well, it's clear enough, isn't it? I wanted to find out if the Customs was suspicious of anything going on in the river. It wasn't. Then I wanted to find out if there was any news, and beyond the pessimism of the barman, there wasn't. Then I rang Weeks, and told him about last night, so as to keep him up to date, and found out from him that the diplomatic correspondents are very like the barmen. And then we came back. What's the weather going to do, skipper?"

Ames sniffed with his head through the companionway. "There may be a breeze this afternoon from the north'ard. Might be a bit of fog about too, I shouldn't wonder. Bound to get some sooner or later."

"Fog," said Scott slowly, "would suit them. Can't you be a bit more certain about fog, skipper?"

"I could not," said the old man, nettled. "I'm not the B.B.C. All I can say is that if I was workin' up the river, or down it for that matter, it's the sort of day I'd watch *all* my buoys, instead of just going along as the old ship took me. There may be fog and there may not."

"Well," said Scott, "let's eat. I'm going ahead with arrangements for a clear night. If it does come up thick I'll blame you for not being more certain in your judgments."

"Are we going to wait for the ebb?" asked Ann.

"We are not, we're going to eat and go. We'll head through the Nore, and take the Overland Passage as far as the Spaniards, and haul north again somewhere about there. And we're not going to make any preparations until we're well out of sight of this place. I don't like being watched."

"If nobody followed us yesterday, and nobody saw us last night, that's hardly likely," said Ann.

"'Hardly' is the operative word," said Scott firmly. "But even 'hardly' admits of possibilities. We're bound to be spotted sooner or later, and I'd prefer it later. Are you going to get lunch, or are you going to sit there chopping logic until Uncle Henry and I collapse with hunger?"

An hour later they swung round the end of the pier, dodged a paddle steamer and two motor launches, waved cheerfully in answer to an hilarious youth in charge of a small motor boat, and slipped away from the cheerful bustle of the Southend shore.

As they picked up the Nore lightship again, and headed

across the Warp towards her, Ames said gruffly, "And just what fool idea have you got for this evening?"

"I'm going to spend low tide on the Oaze Sand," said Scott calmly. "There's a chance, an outside one, I admit, that one might be able to see something from there."

"And how do you propose to get on the sand?"

"With the dinghy," said Scott. "Why not?"

"And how do you propose to get off again?"

"Still with the dinghy."

"And how do you propose to hang on to the dinghy with the water altering every minute—while you're running round the sand trying to trace imaginary noises?"

"I'll go with him as boat tender," said Ann quietly. "That's the obvious solution."

Ames goggled at her. "Your father . . ." he began.

"Would tell me to do just that," said Ann. "Scott can't move about the sand he has to watch the dinghy, and even if he takes the boat anchor up the sand and stakes it, he'll never find it again by himself in the dark."

"That had been worrying me," said Scott. "Skipper, she'll have to come. It's too dangerous to have the *Shannon* moving in the fairway two nights running, we had the devil's own luck in dodging the big motor boat last night. The luck might not hold to-night."

"And what do I do?"

"You put us down—and what's a damn' sight more important, you pick us up again. Listen, this is my idea, we make one passage through the Oaze Deep just after night-fall, you put us over the side—without stopping the ship—just clear of the West Oaze buoy. . . ."

CHAPTER IX

"Rowlock's slipping," said Scott in a tense whisper. "Can't help it—have to keep going."

He dipped the oars again, pulling strongly across the rip of the tide. The faint creak from the rowlock was softer now, less betraying. He went on doggedly.

Ann, crouched in the bows, said, "Still a bit more starboard. I think I can see the edge already." She spoke softly, so softly that Scott, straining at the oars, half-guessed at the words.

For three minutes he pulled on, then Ann whispered, "Easy."

Scott dipped one oar deep, and felt the blade touch on the sandy bottom.

He pulled three more cautious strokes, and again the blade touched. A moment later the keel of the dinghy slid on to the sand with a faint rasp, like sandpaper drawn lightly over stone.

Deftly Scott shipped the oars, laying them noiselessly on the thwarts. He felt Ann climb over the bows, and the dinghy floated again. Once more there was a rasp as she pulled it up. He got out in turn, stepping in his sea-boots into six inches of water. The dinghy floated free again and pulled round, slewing to the drag of the tide across the sand.

Scott moved as silently as he could to Ann, who stood holding the painter with one hand on the stem head. "Keep her afloat," he whispered. "You've got the torch?"

"Yes."

"If I whistle twice, flash it."

He waded off, moving cautiously to avoid the noise of splash. The water shoaled swiftly. In five paces he was treading in puddles. In another three he was on firm, dry sand. The going was good now, and he moved fast, the sea-boots making no noise save once when he slithered on a little, mud-filled depression.

The sand was wider than he had expected. At this state of the tide he had anticipated a strip perhaps a cable wide. He walked almost three hundred yards before he heard the slap and murmur of the ripples on the further side. Immediately he stopped short and began to take his bearings. One by one he checked up the lights. The night was brilliant; stars hung high in the heaven, almost frosty clear, the Sheerness lights were like another milky way, strung along the rim of the dark sea; visibility was at its maximum for a moonless night.

Scott swore softly—as he had sworn before that evening. He had not wanted fog—the fog that Ames had croakingly prophesied—since he had abandoned the idea of using a grapnel, but equally he had not wanted this. The risks were enormous. He turned and peered back across the sand, hunting for Ann and the boat. There was no sign of them however. Ann's clothing was dark, and like him she wore a dark hood pulled well over her face. The boat was brown teak. At three hundred yards then he was safe—but he must get closer than that if he was to do any good.

He stared out over the dark water of the Oaze Deep.

A small steamer was moving down it towards the Girdler light, she was well over against the Red Sand side, too far away to be identifiable. There were some confused lights near the Girdler, but on the water in front of him there was nothing else. Behind in the channels leading to the north there was a string of small stuff, and he heard the wash of

something big, that had passed long since, curl up the sand behind him ; a long crisp noise, like cloth torn slowly.

For twenty minutes he stood, almost motionless, peering over the Oaze. Nothing moved, there was no sound. The little steamer passed down and out of sight, and tug with a barge came by. It passed and the flutter of its engines came up with the wind from the south, and died slowly away. The Oaze was silent again. Scott walked very slowly along the edge of the water, heading towards the landward end of the sand. Something moved suddenly on the blank, wet flat ahead of him, there was a furious squawk, and the rustle of angry wings. Three gulls rose almost under his feet.

He stood still again. Further down the sand another gull called sleepily. As he went on it rose in its turn, was for a moment visible like a white shape against the sky and the starlight, and disappeared. The sand began to trend round towards the Maplin shore. Scott stopped again, listening, staring out across the light dappled water. Once more the wash of something passing came noisily up the sand, three waves of it, following each other in grave succession.

There was nothing for him here. He turned and retraced his footsteps, the tide was further out now, the sand wider, a piece of driftwood that showed darker than the sand was twenty feet away from the water, it had been on the edge when he passed down. Slowly he came to the seaward end of the little islet, before he got there, however, he paused ; the water in front of him was darker now, no shore lights played over it, and only the flash of the Estuary buoys and the distant light ships lit it in fleeting gleams of gold and red. In the middle of the blackness there was a blacker shape, something solidly dark, motionless as far as he could judge. A black bulk, resting on the black surface. He lifted the night glasses to his eyes and peered at it, straining his eyes, his heart beating faintly.

After a moment he put them down, grinning. The black shape was the Mid Oaze buoy, lying out on the edge of the fairway.

He went on again.

And as he went he heard the rustle of the wash of something passing begin to sound upon the sand. For a moment he disregarded it. Every ship that had passed on the other side had sent up its rustling messenger, long after it had gone. The little crest of it raced up the sands almost to his feet, white in the darkness, and lit with points of green, the winking, uncertain green of phosphorescence. The second wave came right up to his feet, splashing against his sea-boots.

And suddenly he remembered that nothing had passed that way—coming in from seaward through the Oaze Deep.

There had gone to sea one faint light on the further side, and following it a tug, moving slowly, sending out no such wash as this. This ship had come in from the Black Deep, she had come in fast—and silently, showing no lights.

The wash went past him swiftly, surging up the sand, racing along the edge of the tiny islet.

Scott crouched on the sand, getting his eyes low to the level of the water, looking for silhouettes against the shoreward glow. Nothing rewarded him. Once again he stood still, listening intently. Water crept up to him and spread beyond. The tide had turned, the flood was beginning to run. He felt the pull of it sucking the sand from beneath his feet, felt the little hollows forming. After a minute or two he moved up to the dry sand and stood again, waiting.

The minutes dragged by. He was beginning to feel cold, cold and stiff. Nothing moved on the Deep, nothing showed against the lights. The memory of the wash had almost gone by, there was nothing to show that he had not made a mistake, that he had not deceived himself, that he was not waiting there on a fool's vigil.

Twenty minutes after the wash had passed he saw a shadow slide across a bright patch of the shoreward lights. It was no more than a shadow. Before he could get the night glasses on to it it was gone, the lights were bright again, the sea was empty.

Once again nothing stayed to tell him that he had not allowed nerves, imagination to betray him. The shadow passed as smoke that is for a moment solid, full of form and shape, and the next is gone.

For six minutes nothing else came to his aid, and then he heard, far down the lessening sand, the susurrus of the wash. It came up to him swiftly, racing along the sand, and went by, muttering and rustling, splashing on the driftwood, and surging far up the gentle slope.

The tide was running strongly now, the islet was vanishing, swallowed as the water rose. Every ripple from the light southerly wind drove further and further over the wet surface. He had to retreat all the time now, stepping backwards pace after pace in front of the swift onrush of the water. He surrendered finally. There was nothing to be gained by staying there, in a little the sandy islet would be altogether gone, already it could not be half the width it had been when he crossed it first. He turned and strode quickly over the spine of it, paused for a moment in the middle and searched for Ann. There was no sign of her.

He moved more quickly now, striding down the almost imperceptible reverse slope to the further edge of the islet. He could not see his footmarks in the sand, there was nothing

to tell him how far he was from the point where he had left Ann and the dinghy. The sand was featureless, there were no landmarks, no guide. He could not be certain, even, if it was towards the seaward end of the sand or somewhere between him and the flick of the West Oaze buoy.

It was getting dangerous to wait now, in a few minutes the last of the sand would be covered. He could feel the mud patches already alive to the new water. He had to guess and to guess correctly, for there would be no time to work to one end of the sand without finding Ann, and then retrieve his error. He had moved so much since he landed that he could not be certain even which half of the sand was the greater. It would be a long swim to Southend. He found himself smiling grimly at the prospect of his adventure ending in a wild swim in the darkness.

To call Ann with his whistle would be fatal—her answering beam would inevitably betray them to the invisible watchers across the water. Swiftly he made up his mind and turned towards the end of the sand that stretched to the Black Deep and the seaward channels.

Two minutes later he saw the loom of a dark figure at the water's edge.

"You left it late," whispered Ann in greeting. "See anything?"

"They're here," said Scott, whispering in turn. "Two of them. One passed up half an hour ago. The other about——"

"Ten minutes," said Ann. "I saw him cross a bright light on the Kentish shore."

"You did? Good girl! Did you see the first one! Look here, we haven't time to talk, I'm not going straight back to the light. We'll tow the dinghy up the sand until we get her round the eastern end, and then we'll pull as far across the channel as we dare, and drift up it. We *must* see something. We *must* get close to them."

He took the painter from Ann, pushed the dinghy till she floated well, and began to trudge through the deepening water. Ann walked beside him, silently. Once or twice the dinghy grounded in a shoal patch and he went back to it, shoving it off impatiently with one hand, and guiding it out to deeper water. Once he put his foot in a sudden hole and stumbled forward with a quick, bitten, "Damn."

Ann said at once, "I'll go ahead. I haven't got the dinghy. Aren't we making an awful lot of noise?"

"Doesn't matter," said Scott. "The wind's still south and they're nowhere near this side. Why the devil did we land here instead of on the Red Sand? We'd have seen 'em then."

They trudged on. It was difficult to see now whether there

was any sand still above water. The ripples came across to them clear from the southward. Still the shallows held, though; for five minutes more they went on, then, with the water almost to the top of her seaboots, Ann stopped.

"We're across the end," said Scott. "She'll float now. Get in the stern this time, Ann."

He pushed her a little further and then climbed in himself. The little craft rocked wildly for a moment and then swung round. Scott settled himself and felt for the oars. With short, quick strokes he pulled off the shallows, keeping as silent as possible. When there was deep water under the blades he began to pull with long, deep strokes that drove the little boat athwart the run of the tide.

The lights of a ship showed to seaward of them, a big ship coming in—but she took the northern passage to the Mouse, and they were not endangered. Scott pulled on. They went in silence now, the woollen stuff in the rowlocks and round the loom of the oars taking up the noise. Only the occasional splash as he dipped, and the rustle under the bow sounded above the stillness. Presently Scott rested on his oars, and the boat swung to the tide.

Ann put her face close to his, moving carefully. "It's gone colder suddenly."

"Well?"

"Uncle Henry said that if it went cold we'd have fog before morning."

"Damn," said Scott. "Don't want that; can't see enough as it is."

He pulled the dinghy's head round till she pointed towards the Red Sand and began to row steadily once more. After ten minutes he rested again. "Time?" he whispered to Ann.

"Five-past eleven," she said, after a glance at the luminous dial of her watch.

Scott rested on his oars. The wind had died right away again, and they floated with the tide. Between spells of listening he would pull a few strokes towards the Kentish side, but they stayed fairly near the centre of the channel.

For an hour they drifted. A barge passed them half a mile away, her starboard light pallid in the darkness. A plane droned across the sky, showing a bright new star across the old. They heard the sound of it rising and falling long after the light was gone. When the last of the drone died the sea became utterly silent again. The shore seemed to recede from them so that they were again at the bottom of a vast pool of darkness, fringed by uncertain lights.

They were still drifting at midnight. Scott paddling up a little against the tide and letting her go back slowly, moved on an irregular diagonal across the channel. A ship was

passing in from the Mouse at the hour, and they heard the four double clangs of her bell come silver clear across the sea.

At one o'clock they passed the dark shape of a buoy. Ann said, whispering the words, "What will Uncle Henry do?"

"I told him to wait until two o'clock if there was nothing moving near him, and then to stand slowly in to Southend again with his lights showing, if we hadn't turned up. I hadn't reckoned on this, but I thought we might miss the West Oaze buoy. If we haven't seen anything by two o'clock I'll pull across the line he'll take and he ought to be able to see us coming down. If he doesn't we can use the torch, I suppose. That'll be the East Cant buoy, we're getting well up to the Nore."

They went on in silence, then, from somewhere very far away, came a low moan.

Scott made a little hissing noise. Before it left his lips almost there was another thin moan. Then there was silence again. Across the silence there were faint sounds caught at and half-heard by their straining ears. Then the moan came again.

And as it came, Scott said, "Hell, I've got it. Fog. That's a lightship somewhere out there. . . . Now we're for it." He had a sudden vision of the fog closing down. Of searching for Southend Pier against a foul tide in the white smother—Thames fogs lasted for days sometimes. They might make one of the lightships perhaps. And meanwhile what was happening in the river? What would happen? How would Ames manage by himself? He felt curious waves of panic welling inside him. It was as if from one small centre of his being cold surges of fear spread out to every nerve end. . . . The moan came again, was followed by the second blast of the distant lightship's horn, and followed again, almost instantly, by the deep boom of a big ship.

The sounds were still no more than thin, faint edgings to the vast silence of the river. Scott hung on his oars and fought down the little waves of fear. In a whisper he said to Ann, "It won't come in yet. I'm going to hold on for a little and then pull out on to the line Ames'll take. We've got the compass and the tide will take us fairly straight . . ."

He began to pull again, heading the little boat towards the Nore. For five minutes he rowed while the wail and grunt of the horns outside came thinly over the water rustle and the splash of the oar blades. Then another voice joined them, a higher note, much nearer, much louder, more urgent somehow. Ann turning, said, "The Girdler . . . I can't see the light."

Scott said grimly, "I know."

Out near the Girdler was another thinner note—one of the

tugs that had passed them going out, probably, further north something else was joining in.

She turned away, staring forward, past Scott's shoulders, staring at the brightness—the comforting brightness—of the Nore, and the long, irregular line of the shoreward lights.

They went on, Scott pulling steadily, the tiny bow wave rustling and whispering and muttering under the planking.

Suddenly Ann put out her hand. Scott stopped instantly as the hand touched him. Ann raised her hand and pointed. "The first white buoy there . . ." she said. "In shore of it . . . there are two bright lights on the shore . . . they went out. Look."

Swiftly, with his heart beating hard, Scott swung the dinghy until he could see. For a moment he watched keenly, then he brought the oars gently inboard and fumbled for the night glass. Ann found it and handed it to him.

"Them," he said softly.

To seaward the horns moaned and blared in the darkness. They were wailing in the Swin and the Barrow Deep now, a rising crescendo of warning. A symphony of fear.

Scott forgot them for a while as he stared over towards the channel that led to Sheerness. The white buoy marked the seaward end of it. Further in there were more white buoys, with a line of red buoys on the port hand. Over against them, not three-quarters of a mile from where they lay, the black shapes were moving.

Somewhere between them and the Girdler a tug, suddenly anxious, led out a wild whoop from its syren. It cut across the lesser noises, the background of moans and grunts and wails that ran across the sea like a barrier between them and the deep water. Scott tensed to it, and then relaxed.

"To hell with the fog," he said. "We're going in."

CHAPTER X

"WATCH it," he went on after a moment. "There's only one there. We know two went up, the other one will be somewhere about, and keep an eye out for that damned motor boat. Curse this fog."

He got out the oars, put them softly into the rowlocks, and began to row again. He pulled a long, purposeful stroke now, the stroke of a man who knows where he is going. The dinghy moved through the water with an answering purposefulness. Behind them the horns wailed. Behind them the fog crept closer and closer, stealing up the Estuary, silent footed, furtive, inexorable.

Ann too disregarded it. Instead she watched the shadow that sometimes moved and sometimes lay still across the pale glimmer of the Kentish lights. She looked from it only to give hasty glances over the empty water to starboard. There was no sign of the motor cruiser. There was no sound at all save for the beat of a far-away propeller to the north, and the unceasing confusion of the horns. She did not look back, but once Scott said, "The Mouse is going." And three minutes later there was another voice added to the horns, a long, six-second blast that droned like a drunken piper through the night.

"Damn, oh, damn, oh, damn," Scott said softly between his teeth. "We'll never do it." And went on rowing.

Ann sat still, watching. The tug astern of them wailed furiously again. The horns seemed to be pressing on them, rising, booming, thundering on them.

A wisp of greyness, a thing impalpable, almost invisible, a momentary blurring of the vision—no more—floated over them and was gone.

"It's coming," whispered Scott.

The greyness came again, the shoreward lights were suddenly watery and pale. The dark shadow was for a moment invisible. The fog was playing cat to their mouse. For a moment it cleared again. Then a thicker wreath flung over them. The light of the Nore and the nearest light-buoy alone pierced it. Yet again, tentatizing, mocking, derisive, it cleared; the lights were brilliant.

Scott dropped the oars suddenly, careless of the faint noise. "My God," he said. "I must get a bearing of Southend Pier."

He found the little hand-bearing compass and lifted it, his hand on the light switch. Then he half-turned. "No, by God," he said gently. "If I can get near to Southend on a compass bearing, I can get close to them." He searched for and found the black shape of the boat, and, even as he fixed it, Ann put her hand on his arm. "Yes?"

"Over towards the Nore," she said. "Just short of it . . . the other one."

"We've got 'em," whispered Scott exultantly, and turned to the oars again.

The fog caught up with them once more. The light on the Nore shone with a brilliant halo. Wisps of it hung over them, licking out the stars in long stripes. Then suddenly the air chilled, the main bank rolled over them, clammy, cold, utterly blind. The Nore was gone. They rocked alone in an utter darkness.

Scott stopped rowing again. "Time?" he asked.

"Seven minutes to two."

"Right. You'll have to hold the compass for me. Put the handle between your knees, and slide the switch on. Doesn't matter, no light could give us away now. Won't need to worry too much about sound either, you'll hear the Nore in a minute. Mustn't talk loudly though. The course is west-sou'-west half-west. No, swing it round the other way, I'll steer by the opposite points. Right. Now keep your ears clear, they're all we've got. Put your hand on my arm as soon as you hear the slightest thing, right or left arm according to where it is. Now we're for it."

He dipped the oars and the boat moved forward again.

The fog held solid about them. Over the Mouse, over the tug—that was coming up fast on them—over the chorus of the lesser voices, the Nore spoke angrily, two long, raucous blasts, hard on each other's heels, and then a long and derisive silence.

The tug came up and passed them, she was perhaps a quarter of a mile away, going fairly fast she seemed to keep up a constant, grumbling monologue, punctuated by angry blasts on the syren, as if she were furious at going home in fog, and wanted all the world to know it. She passed and the sea was quieter in between the blasts of the Nore.

And in between the blasts, when they had been going seven minutes, Ann thrust out her hand, hiding for a moment the green eye of the compass, and touched Scott's left arm. Then, unbidden, she dropped it and switched out the compass light.

The dinghy lay rocking again in the viewless dark.

Fifty yards away something splashed and a voice said "*Vorsichtig.*"

Something thumped on wood, and another voice said, "*Was macht es schon in diesem Nebel.*"

The answer to this was inaudible. Scott pulled again, three soft, long strokes. One of the men spat. They were very much closer now. The first man spoke again, he said, "*Wie viel mehr?*"

"*Dreissig Meter,*" said the other.

"*Gott sie dank.*"

"*Danke Gott erst wenn wir zuruck an Bord sind. Himmel, was fur ein Nebel.*"

There was a little grating sound and then another splash. The first man said, "*Glaubst du, sie werden es heute Nacht schaffen?*"

The other said, "*Nein, sie brauchten Morgennebel, oder wenigstens eine dunkle Nacht. Zwei Uhr ist es jetzt, und vier Stunden brauchen sie. Da, das ist das Ende, jetzt den Raubheimer, vorsichtig damit.*"

There was a bigger splash than before. A voice, apparently that of the second man said, "*Hah.*"

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"*Jetzt raus aus diesem Dreck.*"

There was a low whistle, but no answer came.

"*Rudere mal ein bisschen weiten abwärts . . .*"

A tiny thud came across to them as the loom of a padded oar dropped, then there was a little splashing and the boat drew off. Very cautiously Scott dipped his own oars, matching their stroke, and followed.

The other boat went on, pausing occasionally to whistle. about the fourth pause the whistle was answered, a low, very clear note coming out of the fog well over to port.

"*Gott sie dank,*" said the first voice again. It belonged, apparently, to the elder man of the two. The boat seemed to move more rapidly, the whistle was repeated, twice, then there was a little bump as it went alongside a bigger ship. All the time the blare of the Nore horn cut through and across whistle and conversation, ripping through the fog with swift, sudden accesses of energy.

Again Scott let his dinghy drift. He put up his hand to wipe his mouth, dry slime had formed on his lips. His heart was thumping so violently that he felt it must be heard on the ship. He could hear nothing from her now, there were no voices even. Whatever the men might do when on their own, it was apparent that discipline here was rigid. He dipped the oars and began to row again, heading the dinghy for where he thought the bigger boat lay. For a moment or two he pulled, then he heard the whistle again. It was a low note that would not carry too far, a note that guided but would not betray. Another answered it. Evidently a second boat coming home.

She came in in silence, without even the betraying thump of the other alongside, but on deck somebody stumbled.

There was a pause, then an uncoiled block creaked for a brief second. Scott headed towards the sound. It was difficult to be certain of anything now. The tide and the air drifts turned the dinghy every time he stopped, the fog abolished direction.

Before he had got far, however, he heard the sudden rush of a high-speed propeller. Water crashed harshly for a second, then the rush smoothed down to the purr of a steep stream going through small stones. Swiftly the sound faded, dying in a steep downward curve of rustling. Then it was gone.

Far away they heard more voices, nearer to the blare of the Nore, but after a minute or two they also became silent. The Nore was left king of the stillness, lording it over the faraway voices of its co-guardians of the Estuary.

Scott, resting on his oars, said bleakly, "What now?"

"Home, Mr. O'Hara," said Ann softly. "We've done enough for one night—more than enough, I think."

"And where the hell," said Scott wearily, "is home?"

"You've been rowing for hours," said Ann. "My turn now. Shall we try to make the Nore lightship?"

"What would we tell them?"

"That we were out fishing and—and the fog came down."

"Out fishing, here, at two o'clock in the morning?"

Scott yawned wearily. "We haven't any lines, and we haven't any fish. Of course I know they weren't biting, but still. No, they'd probably call out the Southend lifeboat to pick us up and that would mean explanations all round."

"Is there still a chance of intercepting Uncle Henry?"

"Not one in a million."

"Well," said Ann practically, "let's go up until the tide turns, and then anchor."

"Painter's about twenty feet long," said Scott slowly.

"Three fathom water. We'd get it off the Nore Sand—and the night's still enough. When does the tide turn. Four was it?"

"Four," said Ann, looking at her watch. "We've got an hour and a half."

"It must be two and a quarter miles from here to the end of the sand—we could do it, but the end of the sand's narrow as far as I remember, if we miss it . . ."

"We've got the compass," said Ann, "and the horn will give us a rough guide. We ought to try it, Scott."

"We'd get shoal water sooner on the Cant," said Scott doubtfully. "But I can't remember the lie of it."

Mechanically he dipped the oars into the water and began to row again.

Ann said, "Change places, Scott. You're dead beat."

He shook his head. "Switch on the compass."

"Change places first, and you hold the compass. I'm cold, anyway; I need exercise."

Scott grunted and pulled the oars in. "Never argue with a woman," he said, and yawned again. "I seem to have been pulling on and off for hours."

"You have," said Ann. "About four hours. Take the compass."

She rowed strongly, not worrying as Scott had about noise. The boat went swiftly through the water.

Nearer and nearer came the blare of the Nore foghorn. The tide seemed to be running more slowly now, but the high note of the reed horn leapt towards them, perceptibly nearer at every sounding, a sound that thrust out to them, as if it were searching through the fog for them, hunting for them, diving after them.

They saw the light suddenly. It was more a lightening of the impalpable darkness than a definite light, but the flash of it was the five second flash of the Nore. At each half-

minute it was brighter, a little off the port bow. Quite suddenly it was abeam of them, and the blare of the horn was abeam of them too. Then it began to drop astern. They had passed it perhaps eighty yards away, it was impossible to judge accurately in fog, they never saw the light completely clear. Ann rowed on with the flash diminishing astern of them. It disappeared entirely at length, and the blare of the horn began to die down too. Ann imagined that it had a disappointed note, a tone of dissatisfaction.

It grew fainter and fainter.

There was nothing moving in the fairway now. Out beyond the Nore the long fog lament of the Estuary went on unceasingly. It was an irregular, querulous noise now, uneasy, muttering, restless.

Ahead of them a bell sounded faintly. Scott said, "Steamer anchored in the fairway, wise man; only fools like us are at large on a night like this."

The bell replaced the Nore as a mark of their progress. By its slow crescendo they measured distance. They passed it a long way away, its vessel utterly invisible. They went on into silence, Ann pulling methodically over the still water.

She felt that she had been rowing for ever. Even the water overside was invisible, even the splash of the oars. She could see nothing save the green eye of the compass card. Could hear nothing but the threnody of the river, with the harsh note of the Nore cutting across the softer wailings. The world had narrowed to they two, alone in the little dinghy. It was as if they swam alone in a hell of fog, and the moan of the fog-horns and the syrens was the wailing of the damned.

It seemed endless æons of time before the yawning Scott said, "Spell-o. What's the time."

Ann pulled up the sleeve of her leather jacket. "Twenty to four," she said.

"Ought to be well over the sand now," said Scott. "I'm going to sound."

There was a hank of hambro line in the locker under the stern sheets. He groped for it, made fast his clasp-knife to the end and dropped it over the stern. The line ran out without touching bottom.

He hauled it in, measuring it between outstretched arms. "No bottom at five fathoms," he said. "We aren't where we thought we were, anyway."

They went on. Ann said, "Shall I pull south yet?"

"Dunno," said Scott. "I've a feeling the tide's turned. God only knows where we are."

"Can't we tell?"

"No," said Scott. "No marks. If I could touch bottom with the lead we'd tell soon enough. Idiot that I am, of course

we can tell. The tide must set either east or west here. If it's easier for you pulling west than it is pulling east, then the tide must still be running up."

Ann swung the head of the dinghy round. "Doesn't seem to be much difference," she said.

Scott grunted again. "Slack water, perhaps. My brain isn't equal to coping with anything else. Pull on a bit more and I'll take another sounding, and then we'll go south and bump the sand out of the water."

She pulled on for five minutes. Scott lowered his knife again. "Still no bottom," he said. "Head her south. There must be shoal water somewhere. Shall I take on again."

Ann nodded. "If you've had enough rest," she said.

They changed over cautiously.

Scott began to row with short, powerful strokes, driving the dinghy forward. He grunted as he pulled.

The light was almost on their beam when Ann saw it. A quick blink in the fog, not very far away.

"Now, where the hell are we?" said Scott. "There oughtn't to be any light here as far as I know."

The light blinked again.

"Buoy," said Scott. "But what buoy? Where the hell are we, Ann? Answer me that."

"Let's tie up to it," said Ann practically.

"Good God, why not. You do have lucid intervals, Ann."

Scott spun the dinghy on her heel again and drove her towards the buoy. The light grew rapidly brighter, in a little it was a halo of brightness in the dark. A little more and the fog was white about it. Three more strokes and they bumped against hollow metal that rang.

Scott stretched out his hand and felt the smooth sheer of the buoy. Instantly the dinghy fell away. He pulled back to it and groped. The Dinghy came away instantly.

"Tide's running out," he said. "Take the oars, Ann, and keep her nose up to it."

He went forward and the dinghy dipped grievously. Ann caught the oars and drove her forward until the stem bumped again. Scott stood up groping, while the light flashed serenely and vainly above them.

He groped for a while in vain, then his hands found an upright. He could see the silhouette of the light pillar above him and a bright nimbus at the top. Grabbing below him he found the painter and passed it round the upright. Quickly he made it fast. "Right," he said. "You can get in your oars."

The dinghy drifted away until the light was once more a sudden brightness in the fog.

"Thank God for a ten-foot dinghy," said Scott. "We can both stretch out on the bottom boards. I'll bale out the slop first and then we'll go to bed. Am I tired or am I tired?"

Ann yawned in concert.

As they crept below the thwarts Scott said, "Penalty of fifty pounds for mooring to a navigation buoy. Oh, well, they're welcome. I wonder where the hell we are? Drop of brandy, Ann? No? All the more for Scott O'Hara. Well, I suppose we'll know where we are in the morning, if it doesn't blow a gale."

He pushed a fair half of his thick coat over Ann.

"It'll be colder before it's warm again," he said contentedly. "Sleep's just the one thing I was wanting. I'm not even going to think about them. Hey, Ann, what does Raubenheimer mean?"

He waited a moment. "Hey, Ann! Asleep already? Oh, well, I hope to God it doesn't come on to blow before morning."

He settled himself and closed his eyes.

The light blinked scornfully above them in the fog.

CHAPTER XI

"AIE, you, what the hell are you doing on that buoy there?"

Scott stirred at the voice and murmured drowsily.

"Show a leg, show a leg. Sun's a-scorching your eyes out," bellowed the voice. "Rise and shine, you Southend trippers."

Ann woke. She woke all in one piece, wide awake from the moment her eyes opened. She pushed Scott hard on the shoulder. "It's Uncle Henry," she said, and pulling herself for'ard a little, raised her head between the thwarts.

The *Shannon* was lying downstream and a little to starboard of them, just keeping pace with the tide. Ames waved a cheery arm. "Let go your painter," he shouted, "and I'll pick you up. Jump to it."

Scott sat up yawning. "Now, how in Mike . . ." he began.

"Let go the painter," said Ann, laughing. "Uncle Henry has a genius for turning up."

Three minutes later they were bumping alongside the ketch. "We got them," said Ann joyously; "Uncle Henry, we got them. We were right up amongst them in the fog."

"What does *Raubenheimer* signify? A *Raubenheimer*, not presumably a gentleman of that name. 'Jetzt den *Raubenheimer* . . .'"

"I haven't any German," said Ames curtly. "Come

aboard, how long are you going to stay teetering there. What in thunder were you doing tied up to that buoy?"

"Having a sleep," said Scott carelessly. "How did you find us?"

"I'd have found you two hours ago if you'd had any sense," said Ames wrathfully. "Then perhaps I'd have got some sleep, I've passed that damned buoy twice in the last three hours."

Scott looked at it affectionately. The light was still winking wanly in the grey light of the dawn. The fog had thinned down to a morning mist, and that was clearing in patches. "Don't you swear at that buoy, it's a pal of ours. Pretty well saved our lives last night. What buoy is it, by the way?"

Ames exploded. For a full minute he gave a richblooded opinion on people who navigate without charts in waters they don't know. "Number one Sea Reach buoy," he finished up. "And there's a swinging fine for anybody mooring to a buoy."

"Dire distress," said Scott placatively. "I forgot you were a Trinity House worshipper, Uncle Henry. If that's Sea Reach, Number 1, where in Mike is the Nore Sand?"

"Down there," said Ames, waving an arm to the southward. "Half a mile."

"No wonder we couldn't get any bottom at five fathoms," said Scott mildly. "Ann, our steering was rotten last night."

"You shouldn't have tried to steer in the fog," said Ames wrathfully again. "As soon as you heard the horns going you should have dropped down to the West Oaze buoy and waited for me. I was there inside half an hour."

"Setting aside the fact that we were two miles down the tide from the buoy when we first heard the horns," said Scott. "We'd have missed quite a lot if we had. We know a whole lot more now than we did last evening."

"At the risk of going missing," said Ames stormily. "It doesn't matter about you—what you do is your own business—but you hadn't any right——"

"To take a girl into danger like that," Ann finished the old man's sentence for him. "Uncle Henry, I've been getting into trouble with you and without you for the last five years, and I'm not dead yet. Do you think you could have kept me out if you'd been there instead of Scott?" She waited a moment.

Ames looked at her sideways.

"Well then, don't bully Scott. How did you find us?"

"I waited at the West Oaze for best part of half an hour, and then I went up the north side of the sand hoping I'd hear you hail. Then I came back down the south side to the buoy again."

"How in heaven's name did you find it again by yourself

in the fog?" asked Scott, with a very genuine admiration.

Ames looked slightly mollified. "Common sense and keeping the lead going," he said, with a suspicion of pride. "I waited there half an hour for you again, then I came up the river. I went back to the buoy once, and then I worked backwards and forwards between the pier and the Nore. I knew if you weren't at the West Oaze that the tide must have brought you somewhere up the river. Passed close enough to see the light here once. If you'd had a bit o' sense and kept a watch, you'd have heard the motor."

"And if we had we'd have shivered down in the bottom of the boat and held our breaths, and hoped it would pass," said Scott promptly.

Ames disregarded that. "I saw you soon as it cleared," he said. "I was coming back from the Nore again, to go in to the pier head. We'd better go in and anchor now."

"No," said Scott sharply. "How much fuel have we got?"

"Fifteen gallons, about," said Ames, "I had a look twenty minutes ago."

"That's about fifteen hours running," said Scott. "What'll the wind do to-day, skipper?"

"It ought to come up and blow the rest of this away in an hour's time. Glass has risen a little, we may have a fresh breeze later, 't isn't natural for this calm to go on."

"Right. Put her round, we're going to sea. We'll go out by the Black Deep. No, I can't tell you yet, I haven't made up my mind what it's all about. I'll take her, you go below and sleep, skipper. Ann, you'd better turn in too, get me a handful of biscuits and an apple or something first, though. I've got a hunch and I want to work it out."

"And so," said Scott, "it's clear that they must have some sort of support outside. What he said was, '*Glabst du, sie werden es heute Nacht schaffen.*' Do you think *they'll*—they, not we—do the big job to-night."

"That means somebody outside of themselves. And, anyway, those boats aren't big enough to operate by themselves. My idea is that they've got a big ship of some sort that they go out to just before dawn, and come in from after dark. It stands to reason there must be something like that. I want to find her."

"If they've any sense she'll steam off well into the North Sea as soon as they're aboard."

"Sure." Scott nodded. "But she's got to come back again. We know they haven't finished the job. If we lie out somewhere just this side of the Sunk Light where the pilots lie——"

"She won't come in as far as that," said Ames tersely. "Stands to reason. If the pilots saw a big ship coming in every evening and pushing off every morning they'd be bound to get suspicious."

"Then we'll go outside the Sunk," said Scott stubbornly.

"Take us all day to do it."

"Who cares. Ann, how does the food go?"

"Full and plenty," said Ann. "We can last three days."

"Good. There'll be wind enough for five knots in a little while, it's been coming up steadily the last hour. We'll set the big reaching jib before I go below. Come on, skipper, stop being 'ancestral voices prophesying woe.'"

"I'd throw in my hand," said Ames morosely, "if I didn't know that the devil himself looked after you. Look at last night. All right, I suppose if I was enough of an old fool to come yachting at my time of life, I'm enough of a fool to go and get pitched about around the Sunk."

They set the sail, thunderously. When it was up, Scott went to the cockpit and switched off the engine. "Save as much juice as we can," he said. "That'll give us the best part of four knots, and more in the bag. Keep her as she goes, Ann, that's the last of the Spoil ground buoys there. You won't see anything else for a very long while. Is there any more of that cocoa below? Bless you, fair maid."

He went down, finished off the last of the cocoa and turned in.

At two o'clock Ann routed him out of his bunk. "Watch on deck," she said. "Lunch is ready, meals are cock-eyed to-day. Cold ham and tongue—or cold tongue and ham?"

"Eee, ah." Scott yawned luxuriously. "Where are we?"

"Properly, you ought to say 'Where am I?'" said Ann. "The Sunk Light is about a mile to the northeast. This packet isn't so seventy-five-twenty-five as you made out. We've done the best part of seven knots at times. The tide's been against us all the way."

"If she whacked up to seven knots you ought to have taken the big jib off her. The skipper's no business to be carrying sail at his age."

Ann laughed. "At his age," she said scornfully. "He's been grumbling all the watch about being an old fool. 'A man who'd go to sea for pleasure'd go to hell for a pastime. No fool like an old fool. Get tied up to two lunatics, you can't get away. Deep-sea work in a cross between a sewing machine and a wash-tub with a couple of broom handles.' I can't remember half the gems. But every now and then when she heeled over he'd break off and say, 'Sick 'em, puppie. Red hot set 'em alight. Hell or Melbourne in sixty days.' I've

never seen him so happy in my life. Oh, Scott, he's a darling. He thinks we haven't any balance, either of us, and he's the brake on the wheel of a car that might run away at any minute. Every time he said anything that might seem to show that he was enjoying it he'd look at me sideways out of the corner of his eye to see whether I'd taken it in. He's probably saving some enormous insult for when you go on deck."

"Oh, is he?" said Scott. "I'll insult him. Have you sighted anything?"

"There's a lot of stuff coming in with the last of the tide. He knows all about it. Name, age, date of launch, cargo and all the skipper's characteristics. Including a surprising amount of scandal. Uncle Henry's a naughty old man."

Scott chuckled.

He went on deck after a moment or two, and relieved the skipper. Ames looked at him sourly when he reached the cockpit. "'Course you can take her if you want to. I'd as soon run a dung barge for my part. What fool ideas have you hatched this time?"

"Nothing," said Scott seraphically, looking about him. The fog had quite vanished, and the forenoon was crisp and beautiful. A hot sun shone, and little clouds like trade wind clouds scudded before the cheerful breeze. The sea sparkled, as near a blue as the North Sea ever permits, it was as cheerful, as lively as carefree as the wind itself. There were three ships ahead of them, and the pilot cutter attending to their bellowed requests. A short sea trader abeam of them sent out a flag of dark black smoke that streamed off her funnel with the rigidity of the smoke of a toy ship. A big schooner yacht with everything set was scudding down to leeward, and two cutters, sailing in company close hauled, their sails very lovely and white, played near the lightship. Gulls flew bright winged and calling, all the raucous complaint out of their cries. A day good to be alive on, a day excellent to be afloat.

Scott grinned at Captain Ames. "Who was it?" he said, looking carelessly to leeward. "Who was it I heard shouting something about 'Hell or Melbourne in sixty days' just now?"

"I may have mentioned something of the sort to Ann," said Ames carelessly, too carelessly. "Telling her about the clippers, and Bully Forbes. The one who lost the *Schomberg* playing whist."

Scott shook his head wonderingly. "What a journalist you'd have made, Captain Ames, sir. What are we going to do next when you've finished all your fancy sailing—we can't lay the Shipwash, can we?"

"We can't lay the Sunk," said Ames, his eyes glittering. "What do you think this is, the *Rainbow*? Get it into your head, young man, that this isn't——"

"Hell or Melbourne," said Scott brutally. "Can we lay the Outer Gabbard?"

"We might and we might not," said Ames. He seemed to relent. "All right, even this dung barge ought to do that, if the wind doesn't haul round. What do you want to do?"

"If we went out to the Outer Gabbard, and then ran down to the Galloper lightship and came up here again, we should just about be home in time for tea," said Scott dreamily. "It's a nice day for a sail. Canvey Island boat, sir. Canvey Island boat."

"Meaning?" asked Ames.

"Well, if the wind holds we ought to get round that triangle and get back here by dusk, and if it doesn't we can always switch on the motor and get here, anyway, by cutting corners. If there's anything to see we'll see it. If there isn't . . ." He shrugged his shoulders.

Ames snorted. "Think this is a destroyer? It's eighteen miles to the Gabbard for a start."

"That's the beauty of a triangle," said Scott. "You can always cut your base line short, and come home a quicker way. I want to be here or hereabouts at the end of the twilight, skipper, and I want to get as far as the Outer Gabbard because it's the outermost light, that's all. Now go below and see what Ann's got for you, and then take a caulk. We'll probably keep you up again all night, we haven't got no hearts, we haven't. . . ."

Ames chuckled, and went.

The *Shannon* danced to a little sea that came up to meet her, and her not very beautiful bows sent up a shower of spray that turned to diamonds and pearls before it fell back to the sparkling water. Sun glinted on the wet decks for'ard, and the foot of the fores'l was wet with the driven water. It was very good to be alive.

Ann came up after she had given the old man his lunch. "Where are we going, Scott?" she asked. "He says you do nothing but chant mysteries. Oh, it's a lovely day."

"Outer Gabbard," said Scott. "I thought we might as well do some yachting seeing that we'd come yachting. For a dung barge this ship can sail a bit, Ann. That's what he called her, the old scoundrel. I wonder if there'll be anything for us to see when we do get out there. I don't think so, somehow. I—I don't know what to think about all this, but those boats must come from somewhere, and it can't be the land."

Ann smiled and went below again.

A running cloud fell across the two cutters near the lightship, and dulled their sails. For a minute they lay dull, as if the sun frowned upon them, then the shadow leapt by, and the sails shone brilliant again.

They passed the pilot cutter a mile away, and the lightship almost two miles to leeward. With the glasses Scott could read the enormous "SUNK" on her sides. They plunged on, spray breaking now in an almost continuous shower. The sea was getting up, though there were still shoal places ahead; they were in open water now, getting out from under the lee of the land, the seas had time to make. There was white water everywhere, little spurts of its broken crests, tattered ridges of the blue-green sea. When they broke close enough Scott heard them, a rustle that rose to an angry sound like canvas tearing, and subsided, rustling. The wind rose very slowly. Within the hour the *Shannon* was being pressed. The border of spray on the great reaching jib was high now, and high on the forepart of the mainsail too. He said to Ann, who was sitting in the cockpit with him, "If that old scoundrel below was on deck I suppose he'd say, 'What she can't carry she can drag.' Now I'm a cautious man, we'll take the big jib off her."

Ann nodded. "She lies down to it at times."

"She could stand a little more wind, it's the sea that's beginning to worry her, but she's a good sea boat for all that. Take the tiller and shake her up into the wind while I get the big jib down. We won't worry him."

He got in the jib with lively cursing and a wild thundering of canvas. Twice before he got it smothered the big sail got away and ballooned out in wild diversions of its own. Under the new head sails she rode easily, snoring through the wind-driven water, her lee decks creaming with the endless froth. It seemed as if the perfect wind and the perfect sun would be with them always. The cloud shadows still ran, darkling across the sea, but they served only to underscore the beauty and the strength of the light. The gulls were brilliant winged their calls were a chanting. The *Shannon* was become a ship of beauty, live, eager, jostling the seas with purpose, lifting to the crests with joy.

Ann and Scott in the cockpit both sang. They chanted long, interminable, sometimes meaningless songs to familiar tunes. The sun dropped, but slowly, so slowly that it seemed as if the perfect afternoon would never end. They made the Outer Gabbard lightship, swinging red on the sun-flecked sea, and a mile from it they gybed and ran down to the southward.

Ames came on deck when they gybed, and the three of them talked while Ann sailed her, running, as Ames said, "like a scalded cat" before the wind. Though she rose and fell to the passage of the seas beneath her, there was peace on her decks now. The wind ran with them, and the fight and the flurry of the long reach to windward, the sting of the wind and the spray was gone. The evening seemed suddenly peaceful,

and the sun, as if it had waited on the turn, began to drop swiftly to the unseen coasts to the westward.

An hour after the gybe Scott thrust his head inside the hatch and squinted at the clock on the bulkhead. "Twenty-five to seven," he said. "With my own fair hands I will prepare supper. We won't go down as far as the Galloper, skipper. I think we'll stand in again in half an hour or so if we don't see anything; the wind is falling light."

"Maybe and maybe not," said Ames. "May come up again with the dark, often does. There's something pretty biggish out to sea over there."

"Where?" Scott raised his head.

Ames pointed at a couple of masts and a funnel, and a plume of driven smoke well off their port bow. "I've been watching the smoke for a while."

"Will we raise her enough to see what she is on this course?"

"No," said Ames bluntly.

"Then haul out a bit. I suppose it's one of your damn' pals, and you know all about the girls he had at South Shields, and why they won't serve him with gin at the Prospect of Whitby."

"Maybe," said Ames placidly. "Give her a bit more, Ann."

"What do you want for supper? Eggs?" Scott dropped down the ladder. "Call me if you want to sink her, or anything."

A primus needed filling, and he had to hunt for the paraffin, for Ames had put a sea stow on all the spares. He was still busy with the supper when Ames called down, "She's a cable ship, working." And five or six minutes later, "The half-hour's up, do you want us to haul her in now?"

"Don't worry me," shouted Scott. "Omelette's burning. Yes. Do what you damn' well like."

He heard the run of feet and the creek of the mainsheet blocks, the *Shannon* began to heel over a little more as she made the new course.

Triumphantly he served the omelette when the noise subsided. "Where's your damn' cable ship?" he demanded.

Ames pointed out to sea with his fork. "I've seen her before, somewhere. Can't remember exactly."

"Do you mean to say you don't know all about the past of the acting assistant supernumerary fourth officer?"

Ames shook his head.

"Well, thank God for that," said Scott rudely.

CHAPTER XII

THE wind had dropped to a gentle breeze at the onset of dusk. The *Shannon* no longer heeled to it at all. She went on stolidly, the motor kicking her when the wind failed to drive. She thrust at the little, left-over seas of the afternoon's blow rather than curtsied to them.

Ames and Scott sat together in the cockpit, Ann was below, sleeping. They spent almost all their off time sleeping now, making up arrears, guarding against future calls. Ames said gruffly, "Seem to have drawn a blank to-day, anyway. We'll know in half an hour at the outside; they'll have to pass this bit o' sea by then if they're to make the Oaze same time as last night. Well, there was nothing out there."

"I've been thinking," said Scott softly.

"God," said Ames, groaning.

"No, I haven't any new schemes. I've been thinking about cables—and cable ships. What cable runs across the outside of the Estuary?"

Ames gave a little jump. Then he subsided. "We could have gone alongside her," he said. "We'd easily have got to her before dark. But you're daft, man. Not a cable ship . . ."

"The point is, *does* any cable run across there? I thought all the near continental cables ran across the Straits of Dover, and the Scandinavian and the North German ones ought to leave the coast up Norfolk way or somewhere there."

"What about German ones for the Atlantic?"

"I should have thought they went north about, round Scotland, but maybe they don't; there must be southern ones, anyway. But would they travel this side of the North Sea?"

"It isn't impossible," said Ames stoutly. "Might easily be some reason for a cable there, we don't know anything about it, we haven't any chart that shows 'em."

"She was as near as you like it to being exactly midway between the Galloper and the Outer Gabbard—and they're the last two English lights, she must have been out of sight of either of them."

"I didn't think of that," said Ames slowly. "She must have been ten miles away from each of them—that's out of sight for all that it matters. When did you think this out?"

"I've been looking at the chart," said Scott. "It didn't come at once. A cable ship has a sort of legal right to the high seas."

"You're right, you're right. I didn't even think. Shall we stand out to her now?"

"No." Scott shook his head slowly. "If anything comes in from her to use the Black Deep, it's bound to come this way. We'll go on till we get to the Long Sand Head, and then we'll stand off and on all night between there and the Sunk Head buoy—like the night we waited for Breitenbach and the *Hill of Sligo*."

"Aah, that was a bad night," said Ames roughly. "Don't talk of things like that, it brings bad luck."

"It brought Breitenbach twelve years in a Belgian gaol," said Scott contentedly. "That's where the bad luck went. We've no cause to worry."

"That's what brings bad luck," said Ames firmly. "Stop talking if you can't speak without omens. The dark's coming quickly."

"It won't be a dark night, though," said Scott, looking up. "Bright starlight by the looks of it, and we'll have no morning fog if the wind holds."

"It'll hold," said Ames, squinting up to windward.

"We've that much grace, then," said Scott. "Is that something moving down there?"

"Driftwood," said Ames five minutes later. "It's a tricksey light. Can't judge your distances between now and starlight."

Twice during the first hours of darkness they had similar false alarms. The night was not good for listening. The wind had risen again—not much, but enough to keep the steady murmur of the sea alive. Though they had switched off the engine, and were running under staysail and mizen, there was too much noise from the ship herself to hear the faint beat of a distant propeller; too much crashing of the little seas against the *Shannon's* bows, too much creaking of sheets and odd rumblings, thumps, tiny batterings.

The night went by very slowly, almost as slowly as their own progress back and forth between the two buoys that marked the end of the inner sands.

At ten o'clock Ann came on deck and Ames went below. Scott, who reckoned that if anything had come in it must have passed before this, dossed down in the cockpit beside her. The night went on. Ames relieved Ann at midnight. Scott slept on. He woke at two and kept awake till daylight. Ann joined him at four. The dawn was very lovely. Nothing came out of the Black Deep.

For an hour the day continued lovely. There was a crisp cleanness about it, a crystalline quality in the night washed air. The sea sank and swung beneath it cheerfully. The sun came up coronetted and glowing, and the east blazed wide along the horizon where it rose.

Then, as if the sun had drawn the clouds after it, the sky shut over. At eight o'clock it was blowing fairly hard with a thin, cold drizzle, that came at them almost horizontally across the yellow wave tops.

They were then half-way out to the point where they had seen the cable steamer.

They sighted her again at ten o'clock. She was much where she had been the previous evening. A thin trail of smoke still flagged from her funnel stiffly, as if the wind had teased out some solid core to it, and hung the tattered fragments of the rest along the hardness.

They passed her at twenty to eleven. She was lying to two anchors, and an end of cable passed up over the great bow sheave and disappeared on to the fore deck. She was flying the usual signals and a group of men were busy where the cable ended. There was nothing about her that was even remotely suspicious.

They passed her about three hundred yards away, and stood on out into the North Sea. A yacht might easily take that course running from Burnham or the Blackwater for the coast of Holland. Slowly the drizzle swallowed the other ship, presently they were alone on a yeasty sea, that flicked long splashes of white across its surface, and swung them about in a kind of subdued anger.

They had discussed her in passing, now they were silent. Ames broke the silence, "I've seen her before somewhere," he said again.

"She's not the one that used to lie up just beyond Greenwich?" said Scott.

"The *Dominia*?" Ann shook her head. "No, she was sold foreign, or to the breakers or something, a few years ago. I've never seen her before."

"Can't remember," said the old man slowly. "I just can't remember. I don't know what's the matter with me."

"Well, there was nothing suspicious about her," said Scott. "And short of going alongside and asking if we could examine her I don't see what else we could do. Couldn't see any sign of the sort of boats that we've been watching."

"She had a big launch aft of the bridge on the port side, and a small launch to starboard. Two lifeboats aft of the funnel, one on each side, and one right aft. And a dinghy. I was looking for that too." Ames shook his head again. "Wish I could remember where I'd seen her."

"Well, it doesn't matter," said Scott. "You must have seen most of the cable ships that operate in European waters one time and another. There, she's just about gone now. We'll carry on another half-hour for good measure, and then if

it's still thick we'll stand up to the north'ard and come back just under the Outer Gabbard."

"And then?"

"Well." Scott looked up at the driving clouds. "Well—I—rather think—it's going to be a thick night."

"My God, yes; I'd forgotten that." Ames nodded vigorously to himself. "I wish I could remember."

Ann said, "Are we going back to the Oaze Deep?"

"I wish I knew what to do," said Scott almost to himself. "The trouble is, we don't know what the 'big job' is, and we don't know where it's to be done. If we wait in the Oaze Deep and it's somewhere else, then *we're* done."

"So?"

"I don't know," said Scott frankly. "I thought of hanging about outside here till dark, and then getting close up to her and seeing if anything happened. We ought to have done that last night, really. The skipper was right, it would have been better to have stood out to her—and made certain. Though it was too late, really, when we thought of that."

"Better chance to-night," said Ames. "It's going to be thick, not so much likelihood of their seeing us, much easier to get close in to her."

"If it had been a fine night we could have done it," said Scott; "but it's too late now. Those boats have got the speed of us, if we saw them leave the ship we'd never be able to follow them in. We'd lose 'em long before they got to the sands and then what——?"

"Wait off Sunk Head again?"

Scott pulled out the chart. "There's so much damn' water at Sunk Head." He ran his finger up the Black Deep, pondering. For a minute or two his finger traced mechanically up and down, then it hesitated and settled finally about half-way up the Black Deep, where the Little Sunk and a high stretch of the Long Sand narrowed the channel to a brief mile and three-quarters. "As far as the Black Deep has any narrows," he said, "I suppose this is the point. Seems to me it lies between here and the neck above the Edinburgh lightship. If we back and fill across the channel here, we have at least a sporting chance of seeing anything that comes up. How's the tide round about dark?"

"Getting on for the last quarter of the ebb," said Ames slowly, he was trying to make his own mind up. "You can't call it more than a mile and a half of navigable water, and, if it's blowing at all, they'll be keeping well up to the weather side of the channel to get all the shelter they can from the sand. After all, they're not big boats that they're using, and they haven't got sail. They'll be all out for a bit of shelter."

"Will they come at all if there's any sea?"

"How can we tell?" said Scott. "We can only watch. From the way that bird spoke, though, I should have thought that there was some anxiety to get through with *es heute* . . . the 'big job.'"

"If they pass us, doesn't the same thing hold good as for the watch on the ship herself?" asked Ann.

"Meaning?"

"That we haven't got their speed."

"It does," said Scott frankly. "But I don't think it matters so much. If they come up here then we can be fairly certain they're going for the Oaze Deep, and we can follow on up there in our own time. That fellow said they needed four hours at least for the job. We can get in from the Little Sunk in four hours, so that'll give us the time it takes them to get in from there to find them in. That isn't very clear, but you know what I mean."

"Supposing they meant four hours from the ship," said Ames pessimistically.

"Then they won't be working in the Oaze Deep," said Scott patiently. "Man, do you realise that she's the best part of fifty miles out from the Oaze Deep. We've forgotten that, all of us. Those boats of theirs are fast, but they can't make any speed with the sea lively. Lying where she is, of course, they could leave the ship before dark, and they could even come up most of the Black Deep before dark—nothing to see them except the shipping working up the Barrow Deep, and that's a long way away in the evening. They must have been doing something like that or they wouldn't have been up the river the time they were the other night, but even so, they couldn't do anything in four hours from the ship, anything *big*, that is!"

"Doesn't seem clear to me," said Ames gloomily.

"Doesn't seem clear to me, either," said Scott resignedly. "And I can't make it clearer, but I think our best chance is to lie somewhere about here"—he jabbed his thumb down on the narrows—"and trust to luck. We might lie between the Edinburgh lightship and the Number 3 Spoil Ground buoy here, but there's always traffic there—hopper barges, and so on, and we don't want traffic. Anyway, I put it to the meeting, if any one has a better idea, shout."

"It's your party," said Ames. "I haven't followed half the moves you've made yet, but they seem to work out. We'll try it, though if this rain holds on what the hell you think you'll see after dark I don't know."

"The luck's been with us so far," said Ann gently.

"If you call it luck to be run down at anchor by a drunken——" said Ames wrathfully.

"No," said Ann. "I don't think he was drunk."

Scott grinned. "I don't either. How we do talk. I

think it's about time we came round, and stood up north, this drizzle isn't going to give over yet, skipper."

"Likely go on all day," said Ames, shaking the drip off his oilskins.

They slammed the little ship about, and drove her close-hauled towards the north-west. For two hours they plugged through an empty sea. A barge passed them then, with her tops'l brailed in.

"Bad sign," said Ames dolefully. "Bad sign."

In the late afternoon they slipped in between the sands, and found doubtful shelter in the lee of the Little Sunk.

Scott anchored in shoal water, and they jerked and plunged and reared uncomfortably as the wind and the tide in turn swung them about at the end of the anchor cable.

At the time of sunset—though no sun showed through the driving rain—they got under way again. The drizzle had thickened now, they snubbed at the chain alone in a narrow circle of yeasty water. They could see neither buoy nor beacon, but tattered on the wind they could hear the bellow of the Mid Barrow's horn. Not a soft, cooing note like the horns in the stillness of the fog calm, but a rough, ragged, rasping, tattered rag of a sound that sometimes was loud and lamentable, and sometimes was lost in the skirr and scurry of the wind-ridden seas.

They set the main with two reef, in it, and the small storm head-sails. Ames prophesied wind all through the night and more wind with the dawn. The glass was dropping steadily.

Hour after hour they threshed backwards and forwards across the narrow water. The glow went out of the sky and left nothing but greyness. The grey went out and the dark came leaping behind it. Night fell, and they saw the powerful flash of the Mid Barrow like a sick glow-worm in the smother.

There were two of them on watch now, all the time. For one thing, the lead had to be kept going almost constantly. Other than the lead they had no guide. Ames shone in this dark and devious sailing. Old mastery of the Estuary came to his aid, and they always came back to the quiet of the lee of the sands, a quiet that increased with the falling tide until they found absolute stillness for a while on each return.

And it was Ames who in the end sighted them.

They were threshing back to the shelter of the sand when he made them out. In silence he took Scott by the shoulder and turned him round.

The leading boat was not eighty yards away, dark, silent, stealing purposefully along on the edge of the smooth. She was followed by the second—they picked her up in a moment—forty feet or so astern. They were long, low, unobtrusive, and they melted into the night and the rain almost as soon as the

Shannon had seen them. They showed no signs of having been seen, no signs of any awareness of danger. In less than three minutes they were gone.

"If the rain hadn't slackened a bit we'd never have seen 'em," said Ames contentedly. "What do we do now, let out the reefs and follow them?"

Scott thrust his head inside the dripping hatch. "Ann," he said quietly. "On deck. They've passed us, heading in."

When Ann came on deck, he said, "I don't want to take the reefs out of her till morning. It's a run down the Deep now for practical purposes. The big jib will pull her along nicely if we can get it up. Take the tiller, Ann, and keep her as she goes."

They got the big sail set with very little trouble, and when it was up they came aft again.

Ann said, "I didn't want to hail you when you were for'ard, but I think there's something astern of us. I've heard the burr of a motor twice while you've been working with the sail. You listen now."

They listened. The wind was singing in the rigging, the seas slapped under the counter and rattled their spray aboard. A lightship somewhere—not the *Mid Barrow*, bellowed to a blinded world. They heard nothing.

"Must have been a rope humming," said Scott after a while.

"No," said Ann.

Still they heard nothing.

Scott said, "Go below, now, Ann. There's nothing there. It's still your watch below."

"No," said Ann. "I'll stay till we see what it is."

The wind and the sea went on. The surf was roaring on the *Little Sunk*.

Again it was Ames who sighted it. He said suddenly, "Almighty God, look."

Close by them, just a little to leeward, a light-hulled boat was rolling down the fairway. Close astern of her, so close that they could make out the shape of it even in the darkness, was a strange, smooth, curved shape, clearly in tow of the other boat. It went quietly past them, not twenty yards away. Weird and indeterminate, a ghost boat and a more than ghostly tow. They heard the mutter of the engine for a minute or so, then it was gone.

"Now what, in the name of heaven, would that thing be?" said Scott to the empty night.

CHAPTER XIII

"FOR God's sake let's get the reefs out and follow her," said Ames irritably. "Don't stand there thinkin' about it. We could have hung on to her if we'd had 'em out before."

"No need," said Scott. "We know where she's going, all we've got to do is to keep on keeping on. They need four hours from the job, and the sort of speed they were making it can't mean four hours from the ship and back again. So it must mean four hours there. That gives us plenty of time. Did you hear anything?"

"Heard her engines . . ." began Ames.

"No. Now," said Scott. "Half a second ago, I thought I heard . . . there . . ."

"Nothing," said Ames.

"Nothing," said Ann. "Surf on the sand perhaps, it must be getting on for low water."

"Listen," said Scott.

The others heard nothing, waiting in an anxious silence. The *Shannon* leapt and lifted like a live thing under the pull of the great jib, spray broke and scattered by them, whistling. The sound of it, the thud of the little seas, the rustle and hiss of their wake drowned out all lesser noises. The strain of listening became magnified, Scott felt as if his ears were hurting him. No reward came for five long minutes, then he said suddenly, "There it is."

And Ann this time said, "Yes."

For twenty minutes they drove on, holding a good course in the middle of the Deep, while astern of them the murmur of engines grew steadily to a deep note.

Ann recognised it first. "That's her," she said quietly.

"The boat that ran us down?" demanded Ames.

"Or a boat with the same make of engine," said Ann confidently.

"She'll pass to leeward the way the sound is," said Ames.

"If it's her," said Scott slowly, "she won't pass us. Look here, she was working as a sort of guard boat the other night . . . I think she's close enough now. We'll haul up to windward a bit and let her by. . . . Bring her up a bit, skipper."

"Aah, she'll pass like the rest. Won't see us in this smother, we aren't making any noise."

"Bring her up. Can't take chances."

Ames started and put his helm down a little. "Get in your main sheet," he said irritably.

Scott grinned. "Doesn't matter," he said, bending down to get a glimpse of the faint-glowing compass card. "'Tisn't speed we're after."

The noise continued astern of them.

After five minutes on the new course, Scott said, "Push her up a bit more, skipper, there's something funny here."

"You get the lead going, then," said Ames gruffly. "And look out for smooth water. I don't want to put her on the Little Sunk."

Scott reached for the coiled lead-line. "See anything, Ann?" he demanded as he straightened himself.

"No. But it's closer than it was."

"I thought so too. How the devil . . ." He went for'ard to the main shrouds.

The beat of the engine was clearly closer now, a little out on the weather quarter as if the newcomer was cutting the slight corner that they had made with the alteration of course.

Scott, his heart pumping furiously, took his cast and got no bottom at five fathoms. He doubled aft again along the reeling deck. Through the rush and sting of the spray, through the long singing of the wind in the rigging, through the crash of their wake it was plain that the engine beat was closer, much closer. There was mystery in this swift following, this close pursuit by a thing they could not see. Ann had the night glasses when he reached the cockpit, but in the driving smother of the rain they were blind. The purr of the engines was nearer than ever, a long, continuous rumble that overcame the noises of the wind and the sea and the rain.

For a long minute Scott listened. The other boat was still a little out on the weather quarter, a little broad of their course. He bent down to Ames. "They're after us," he said. "God knows how, they can't possibly see us. Only chance is to dodge. I'll slack off the main sheet and you can swing her down wind, as far as you possibly can without gybing. We may throw 'em off, but I don't know. Try it." He bent down to the cleat and cast off the turns. Ann went to the jib sheet.

The night grew suddenly peaceful as they ran like a frightened bird before the wind. The crash of spray was gone; the song of the wind in the rigging, the rush of the air past their faces, the illusion of absolute calm was almost frightening.

And for a moment in the stillness there came the roar of the other boat's engines, a rising, rumbling, thudding noise that surged up to a climax . . . and began, as suddenly, to diminish. The three on the *Shannon*, holding themselves tense in the new quiet, felt their taut nerves relax.

"Done him" said Ames, voicing their thoughts, and then added sardonically, "For the time being."

The rumble diminished, growing less and less till it was little more than the wandering murmur they had first heard in the night.

Scott, said, "Yes, but how the devil was he following us. He couldn't have seen us. Even when the noise was right on top of us we couldn't see a thing—and he couldn't either, or he'd be down on us by now."

"Pure coincidence," said Ames roughly. "We only thought he was following us."

"Then why," asked Ann quietly, "was he headed on a course that will take him on to the dry part of the Little Sunk within the next five minutes or so at the speed he's going?"

"Some devilment of his own," said Ames. "Why should we be guessing all the time as to what he was up to; that's his business, as long as he was not chasing us. I always——"

"Shut up," commanded Ann. "Listen."

The sound of the engine was suddenly louder in the darkness astern of them.

For five minutes they endured it. There was something uncanny in this blind pursuit, it was as if they had left scent behind them like a fox for a questing hound to find, as if they had left tracks on the trackless face of the water. They showed no lights, they moved without sound—save for the mutter of the bow wave and the crash of the little seas against their side—noises that were natural to the time and the place, noises that no listening apparatus, however sensitive, could pick up and dissect out of the welter of wind noises about them. There was nothing that an enemy could trail them by, nothing that a huntsman could follow—and yet, they were being trailed, were being hunted.

Scott said at last, "We must be getting near the Long Sand. We'll gybe her now, and stand out to sea again. He seems to lose a little when we alter course sufficiently abruptly. Try it, anyway, unless you can think of a better plan."

Ames groaned. "If only I could get one single glimmer of a light. God alone knows where we are now, with all this messing about. All right, we'll try it. If we can pick up a light I'll try drawing him across the Long Sand; he may need more water than we do, and so lose his tail feathers. Stand by to gybe."

They went to their positions. With a thud and a thundering of their head-sails, the *Shannon* lurched over on to the other tack, and, as they hauled their wind, lay down to it till her lee decking was awash.

"Wind's freshening again," said Ames contentedly. "We'll shake him yet."

They shook him for perhaps six minutes this time, and then

they heard the motor nearing them again, heard the steady drive of it, the relentless, slow crescendo.

Scott groaned in spirit. There was something quite beyond them here. Some force of evil that they could not imagine. Some powers of darkness that were beyond conception. The whole night seemed warring against them, the wind, the rush of the rain, the brutal heave and thrust of the seas, the blind darkness in which they ran, hotfoot among the death that lurked in the sandbanks.

Time and again they twisted and turned, altering their moves in a desperate effort to outwit the enemy, and time and again they lost. He made no attempt to come alongside them; with the speed of which they knew he was capable, there was nothing they could do to prevent this—and yet, it never happened. Always the roar of the engines reached the top of a wave of sound, and stayed there, never nearer. Always they twisted away a little after that maximum had been reached, and always they were caught again.

"What's his game?" asked Scott, coming aft with the dripping lead-line once. "What's his game? Damn him! Oh, damn everything about him. He could have cut us down an hour ago if he'd wanted to. What does he want us to do—and how in hell does he make us do it?"

"What did you get last cast?" demanded Ames.

"Four and a half fathom."

"We'll go and look for deep water again," said Ames abruptly. "He's trying to force us up on to the sands, that's what he's up to. Wants to get us up on to the weather side of the Long Sand, I think, so that as soon as we strike the seas will finish us off. Hell, I wish I knew our position. Must be the Long Sand, though, we're heading due south and we have had a fairly steady shoaling the last three casts. We'll put her round again now. Aaah, never mind where she is. I'm not worrying about her now, she'll pick us up again whatever we do. She's got the devil himself aboard."

They slammed round again and beat up across the channel. They were cold, wet through their streaming oilskins, infinitely weary. The pitiless rain drove on, never letting up for an instant, never giving them so much as a glimmer of light. Their hands were raw with the harshness of the wet ropes, their arms and legs bruised with falling in the darkness, and stumbling about the decks. They were cold, and infinitely weary.

And behind them the pitiless beat of the engines crept nearer and nearer, thrusting up blindly through the blind darkness.

Ann saved them from something close to madness. She said suddenly, "That ray thing——"

"Rays be damned," snapped Ames.

"No." Ann turned as if she would hit the old man. They were all near hysteria. "There is a ray thing. Wait—wait a minute. Wait . . . Infra-red rays . . ."

Scott turned suddenly.

"No," he said. "I know what you mean, it isn't infra-red rays, it's some sort of heat ray; at least it is some valve arrangement for detecting the waves given off high up on the Angstrom scale. The Aldridge Detector. That's it." Suddenly he was enormously relieved. This pursuit was no longer ghostly, no longer uncanny, inexplicable. In a moment all he had heard, all he had read about the Aldridge Detector in the papers had come back to him. Liners were being fitted with it, and men-of-war, and anti-aircraft units. The thing could pierce mist, thick fog even. It could see where no searchlight beam could penetrate, where no eye could possibly see.

It explained everything, explained the calm unconcern of the ships that had passed them first, the disregard of the towing ship. They had gone on up the river towards the Medway entrance in the complete certainty that the escort boat would, in her own time, pick up the stranger.

The thing might be in the nature of a modern miracle, but it was no longer mystery. Their enemy was human, to be fought as man fights man. Scott listened to the beat of the distant engine almost with relief.

Three minutes later the rain cleared, for the space of a long minute. Scott was staring astern, but the other boat was still too far off to be visible. Ames brought him out of his eager watch. "Get a line on that damn' light," he barked.

Scott leapt for the hand-bearing compass and took the reading. Ames was skipper this night, the Thames Estuary was his wash-pot, in this smother of dark and rain Scott had no skill. The rain closed down again, the lightship in the Barrow Deep paled, was there for a moment like a wan ghost, and went out. The deep booming of the horn came across the night again. Ames said, "We'll try to take him across the shoal. God knows how much he draws; hope it's more than us, anyway. Get for'ard with the lead again."

Scott went forward, as he brushed past Ann the girl said, "Good luck!"

He took a cast and got four and a half fathoms. They were on the edge of the shoal already.

The beat of the motor astern of them took a higher, a more urgent note. It moved from their wake and drew out on the quarter, going ahead of them. "Going to head us off," said Ames grimly. "Well, I know where I am now. Back we go again . . . Scott!"

They stood about and headed out to sea. Scott came aft again. The old man had taken over the *Shannon*, he was running the show now. "D'you want me to keep the lead going?" he asked.

Ames shook his head. "There's a tongue of the sand comes out, just about here. I'm going to come about again just now. If he tries to head us off again—rushing ahead like that—he'll pile himself up on it, given a bit of luck. Anyways, it'll take more than the lead to save us this night. Stand by your sheets."

The other ship had caught up again and was throbbing along almost abeam and to windward of them, so that the faint smell of the exhaust came down with the wind, and the roar of the engines was very near. Ames waited until she had drawn out a little on the bow, and then he put his helm hard down. The *Shannon* spun round with a little crash as the boom went over, the sails filled and she roared away again on the new tack. The noise of the engines spun on into the distance. Grimly the old seaman forced the *Shannon* up to windward, fighting every inch of the reluctant sea. From far away, after the inevitable little delay, the engines roared after them again, thrusting out to windward, closer than ever before, so close that twice Ann thought that she had seen the pursuers.

Ames, crouched over the tiller, nursing the yacht like a nervous horse, he was grumbling and muttering away to himself, a sort of infernal litany of his own, the refrain seemed to be, "I'll run the b——aground. I'll put him on the mud."

They ran suddenly out of the wild chop of the deep water into a patch that was almost smooth. Scott, with a hasty cast of the lead, said, "Two fathom, and the lee of the shoal."

Ames said, "He'll hit first, the dirty so and so."

Even as he spoke, the *Shannon* bumped heavily, scraped for a shattering moment along the sand, and then pounded violently, heeling far over with the head-sails roaring. The following sea leapt over the clumsy stern and flooded the cockpit. Scott, flung off his feet by the first shock, was swept along the deck by the force of it, clawing frantically for a handhold. The main shrouds stopped him, and he fought for a footing, hauled himself clear of the water, and got suddenly to his knees. The night was blacker than ever, he could see nothing save the battered outline of the cabin top with the white spray around it. He spat out the salt water and called. Ames and Ann answered him.

After the following wave had flung itself off there was no more water on the deck. The little seas that came out to them, short lived from the invisible sand-bank upwind, were insignificant, splashing things, they brought spray with them

only, no danger. Under them the tide swirled, still setting out, with a snarling viciousness.

He sensed, rather than saw these things as he staggered aft. Half-way there the *Shannon* righted herself a little as Ames, fighting the tangle of ropes in the inky blackness, let go the mainsheet and the jib.

"Any chance of kedging off?" he bellowed, as he reached the stern.

"Not a damn," shouted Ames as he let go the mizen. "Get the head-sails off her. I'm going to try to get the engine going—not much chance, though, tide's running like a river in flood."

Battling with the whipping, lashing, thunderous canvas, Scott found Ann beside him. The shackle in the foot of the big jib hit him behind the ear and almost dropped him. He said, "Get to hell, Ann; this thing's mad." But she clawed grimly at the folds, smothering it foot by foot till the whole thing was down on deck and lashed up with its own sheets.

The fight with the mains'l was even worse. By spilling wind from it, by juggling desperately with invisible halliards and stiff, wet rope in the darkness, they got it down on the port side of the deck, the boom lashed somehow to the side of the cabin top. There was no sound from the engine.

The heel of the deck was growing steadily as the water slipped from under them. Every minute she lay over more and more, even if Ames got the engine going it could do nothing now. There was no hope for them until the tide turned. Scott had no idea of the time, but it could not be much more than half an hour from low water now—if the gods were good; if this were just an ordinary stranding there would be no danger. The *Shannon* took the ground fairly well, at slack water they could lay out the kedge in safety, three-quarters of an hour the other side of low water they would be comfortably afloat again. The wind would not harm them in the lee of the great whale back of the Little Sunk like this. The dinghy was still with them, thank God.

They dropped the mizen, smothered it easily, and went back to the cockpit. The decks were a wild tangle of snarled lines and rebellious canvas, but the cockpit was clear. There was still no sign from below.

For a moment they stood silent, listening. Ann said, "Can't hear a thing."

"God, I wish I knew what they were up to," said Scott tensely.

From below Ames shouted up, "Dead as a last year's daisy. Have you got the rags off her? Then come down and give me a hand. Ann, there's a deal of water below, pump."

Scott dropped down the ladder as Ann cleared the handle

of the pump. Ames had a torch hung to a hook underneath the deck, and was working grimly in its light. "That following sea . . ." he said abruptly. "We shouldn't have left the hatch open like that, every damn' thing is wet in here, water in the carburettor, the magneto drenched, everything——"

"That's bad," said Scott, squatting beside him. "What do you want me to——?"

"That isn't the worst of it," said Ames roughly. "Not by a hell of a long way. Something went below when we struck."

"Sheered the keel bolts?" asked Scott. "I was bowled over, didn't hear things properly."

"No," said Ames slowly. "Her keel isn't deep enough for that—I think she's just opened up all along the garboard strakes. She's making water like a basket. All of six inches since I came down."

"Well, we can't sink, anyway," said Scott wryly.

"The tide'll turn in twenty minutes," said Ames. "And then—we—can."

CHAPTER XIV

"BUT where the hell are they? What are they doing?" Scott peered round him through the driving mist as if he could penetrate its dank curtain and discover the enemy.

"They must know we're here," said Ann. "And if we're here in the lee of the sand, they can't think we'll sink. They won't know that she was rotten below, and just opened up like a pack of cards. It's terrible waiting like this."

Ames broke the little silence that followed. He said, "It seems to me as if they were trying to force us into an accident that'd look natural. It stands to reason they don't want two collisions in the Estuary in a few days—bound to start people looking into things. They don't want any inquiries down the river."

Scott nodded to himself. "They could have run us down any time after they picked us up," he said.

"Instead of which," Ames growled, "they tried to force us on to the breakers on the Long Sand. Damn them!"

"And we tried to force them on to the Little Sunk. We're about level there."

Ann said quickly, "Do you think we have. Perhaps that's why we've heard nothing—seen nothing."

"Wish I could think so, Ann," said Ames heavily. "But there's a bit of water between us and the sand still, and she

probably doesn't draw more than three feet or so. Besides, with her engines she'd have got off straight away."

"Then . . ."

"God knows. I think they'll come back to finish us off if they find we're still afloat after an hour or two. I think they're just waiting to see what happens when the tide turns. We'll come off the sands then, naturally—or at any rate, they must think we will—and they'll start up the old game of forcing us down on to the lee shore."

"Well," Ames put an end to the fruitless discussion. "We've talked enough, let's get to work and make the dinghy seaworthy, she's a good little packet and she'll stand quite a bit of sea if we use her properly."

Ames in the brief minutes that followed his discovery of the hopeless leak, had evolved a plan for using the dinghy. Now, using their torch sparingly, they began to prepare the little craft. With planks ripped from the fittings in the cabin, they made a rough decking over the bow third of the boat, and covered it with the thick canvas of the working jib. They nailed that well down the sides of the dinghy, so that it came below the rubbing streak and would keep out water even if she plunged clean through the steep little seas. With more planks, not caring for anything except strength, they continued the decking aft on either side, so that there was no more than cramped room for them in a sort of narrow cockpit. They covered this with canvas too, leaving the inboard edges loose and wide so that they could pull them round them as an apron.

Under the thwarts they lashed the spare petrol cans—four of them, watertight and infinitely buoyant. They fitted the outboard motor, carefully wrapped up, over the stern. They lashed the rowlocks into place, and then put loose lashings round them and round the oars, so that the latter could not float free and lose themselves. The tide had turned long before they finished, and was hurtling past them up the river. The rain drove on, the wind blew.

And of the other ship there was no sign.

Ames's last preparation was a sea anchor. It was a primitive affair of a frame of wood and a long bag botched up out of a big piece of the reaching jib. He made it fast to the dinghy painter and they stowed it in the "cockpit" to be used as a last resort. When it was finished they were ready, and as silently as they could they slid the dinghy over the side again, and held her alongside.

On Ames's advice they had not laid out an anchor. If the other ship was holding them with an Aldridge detector then she would follow the *Shannon* as soon as she was afloat again. Ames planned to abandon the *Shannon* as soon as she floated—

it was desperately certain that she would not float for long—and try to get into the shelter of the uncovered sand while she drew the enemy away. It was a plan so desperate that even he hesitated as he outlined it to the others, but there was no alternative. The *Shannon* was doomed, and they with her whether they sank when she sank, or whether the other ship made some last intervention, better the dinghy and the wild chances of the night. She would float at least, that much was certain. Thoughtfully Ames thrust a flask of brandy into his jacket pocket. They would need it before the night was out.

The tide came relentlessly in.

Still there was no sign of the other boat.

The *Shannon* filled slowly, keeping pace, almost, with the rising tide. If she ever floated she would not float for long. Scott dropped the lead to the bottom and kept his finger on the line, waiting for the first sign of movement.

"If we can hang out till dawn, we'll be all right," said Ames once, and was silent again.

Ann said nothing.

The tide ripped past them.

Ames broke the silence again. "She'll float in a minute," he said. The *Shannon* was moving uneasily, sluggishly, a reluctant shuddering. "Into the dinghy, Ann. Give me the line, Scott; you get in too, we don't want to waste time."

Scott followed the girl. "Right down on the floor boards, Ann," he said. "You'll be out of the wet there, anyway. I've got to row."

"I wish we could use the motor," she said.

"Forty to one it won't start," he said sourly. "And if it does it'll draw 'em after us like a nice little magnet. If we hear 'em go off after the *Shannon*, we might wait until the sound of their motors dies away and then try it. If they're out of range for us, we ought to be out of range for them. How's it going, skipper?"

"There or thereabouts," said the old man evenly. "Give her another three minutes."

Scott settled himself with the oars. Suddenly a thought struck him. "Skipper," he said, "wasn't there a dinghy anchor on board?"

"No;" said the old man. "I'd thought of that."

"Yes, there was." Ann's voice came muffled from under the improvised decking. "It's in the fore-castle, behind that bolt of spare canvas."

"For heaven's sake. Get it, man. We'll lie to it here, and let the old dear drift away, and save ourselves all the sweat and danger of emergency rowing. Do you think you can get it, skipper?"

The old man was already forward, dropping through the square hatch that led to the galley.

The little boat swung wildly up and down beside the *Shannon*. The lop gave her an exaggerated, almost insane motion beside the comparative steadiness of the bigger boat. She shot up to above the level of the other's deck and dropped so that the green of the anti-fouling paint on the under body was black and dark in contrast to the faint ghostly loom of the hull.

Scott, hanging on to the line and fending her off with his spare hand as she snubbed up to the other, was flung wildly about in the narrow, improvised cock-pit of the dinghy.

Ames was gone perhaps not more than two minutes, but it seemed an hour. He came back with the anchor ready bent on to a light line, and lowered it carefully in the dark to Scott. The dinghy crashed up against the big ship as Scott took it, but he managed to thrust it off again as he got his balance with the load. Cautiously he passed the line through the fairlead in the bows, and then let the anchor go with a splash over the side, letting the line run until it was up and down.

Then he called up to Ames again and the old man, watching his chance carefully, dropped to the after-thwart of the dinghy, and settled himself in the stern. "Right," he said. "Let's see if it'll hold, there's about twenty fathom of line there, let it run."

"We mustn't lose sight of the *Shannon*," Scott muttered. "Got to see if she floats off all right." He let the line run through his hands, and the dinghy swung away from the yacht in a vicious leap, drove with the tide under her stern, yawed wildly as the wind caught her, and then, as Scott checked the line, gradually brought up to the little anchor.

"Holding," said Ames gruffly after a moment as the motion became more settled. "Make that fast."

The movement, now they were away from the yacht, seemed a little less violent. Vaguely the bulk of the *Shannon* rocked and swung in the darkness beyond them, heaving until she rode high above them, dropping—as they topped a crest—until she was almost below them. Her motion seemed so wild that twice Scott thought that the yacht was afloat and clear. It was impossible from the heaving dinghy, without horizon or any stable object, to be certain whose was the motion—the *Shannon's* or their own.

She went quite suddenly. One moment she was just ahead of the line that cut hissing through the water as the dinghy rose to a sea, then she was a faint, uncertain ghost, ripping away with the tide. A moment after there was no sign of her. The sound of the seas slapping against her sheer went with her, and they swung and gyrated almost in silence in

the dinghy. The hum of the wind through the rigging was gone too. The world was still save for the splash of the seas against her tiny bows, the rip and rustle as the wind took a white cap off the crest of a swell, and the deep boom of the lightship.

And through the silence they heard, far away, the purr of a powerful motor starting up.

Scott grinned in the darkness. Ames drew his head close to him. "Anchored about a cable and a half to leeward," he said. "We've got him fixed."

The purr rose in a swift rush of sound, settled to a steady beat and then began to fade very slowly out of hearing.

They waited until the last faint whisper of it had passed away and then Scott spoke. "Gone," he said. "She must be half a mile away by now. We'll give her another five minutes and then we'll cut loose ourselves. Skipper, d'you think we could get inshore with this battleship? We'd have the wind behind us if we ran for Margate."

"Let's try," said Ann.

Ames shook his head vigorously. "It'll be breaking all across the Long Sand with this wind. You've never seen the sea that's set up on the shallows there in a gale. I have. We wouldn't have a dog's chance."

"What then—get into the lee of the sand?"

"It's the best thing," said Ames slowly. "We *might* try to work up the Black Deep a bit and hope to hit the Edinburgh lightship. We'd have the wind on our quarter then, and the sea wouldn't be so bad—but *they're* up there."

"We could risk it, all the same," said Scott quickly. "If you think there's any chance at all . . ."

Ames shook his head again. "This wind'll drop with the dawn," he said. "And they ought to be out of the way by then. We can't risk it now."

"We can try," said Ann.

"Be fools if we did," said Ames gruffly. "As long as there was any chance of better conditions later. 'Tisn't ourselves we've got to think of now—they've got to know of this ashore, and damn' quickly too."

"The wind may drop with the dawn," said Scott; "but the sea will be over the sand long before that. We'll be out of shelter."

"If it gets too bad," said Ames, "we can put out the sea anchor and drift to that. We can't afford to risk the wind *and* them. Stand by the anchor line."

Scott gave it up. The old man knew his sea best. If there was any chance of the wind moderating with the light they must wait for it. To chance things as they were might be heroism, but it was most certainly folly. He grinned at

Ames blunt obstinacy, and said, "Right. Do you want me to row?"

Ames grunted, "Pass me the line."

Scott passed it and fumbled for the oars. "I'm ready," he said after a moment.

Ames began to haul in. Presently he said, "There or thereabouts. Stand by." After a moment he said, "Anchor's up and down." There was the briefest of pauses, then he said sharply, "Clear. Row like hell."

Scott dipped the oars and pulled. It was wicked rowing, the motion of the dinghy threw all possibility of timing out of question. One oar would be deep while the other beat on the empty air. The clutter of the canvas and the false deck encumbered every stroke. The cramped space hampered every movement.

He strained desperately, recovering, with spasmodic jerks that strained every muscle in his body, from the constant crabs. As a sort of chant, a rowing prayer almost, he thanked the foresight that had made them lash the oars to the rowlocks and the rowlocks to the boat. A free oar would have been impossible. Even now he did not know if they were making headway against the wind. There was nothing to judge motion by, save the wave tops racing past them. Nothing to show that they were moving over the ground.

He pulled on. It seemed already as if he has been pulling for hours. Ames bent towards him, silently. Ann, behind him, was silent too. The oars dipped, the boat rocked, the water roared, the spray flung over them. He dipped and pulled, thrust at the water and swept the short blades through it. Ames still watched him, holding the anchor line between his hands. The wind sang by them, the low clouds rushed over them.

And Ames said suddenly, hauling wildly at the anchor line, "You're doing it, you're doing it; stick it, Scott—stick it!"

When he had first hauled at the anchor he had raised it less than a fathom from the bottom. Now it had struck bottom again, he had felt the bump. They were in shallower water. They were getting close to the sand.

Scott redoubled his efforts. Every time he felt the blades take hold he threw every ounce of his power into the stroke. The boat moved forward wildly, in a series of jerks and rushes that alternated with little desperate pauses when one blade missed, and the dinghy swung round broadside on to the wind, losing the precious ground she had gained.

The anchor touched again and was hauled up a fraction more. It touched again—again. The water was smoother now, growing more smooth with every powerful stroke. The rowing was easier, the oar blades caught the water each time.

The dinghy lurched forward with each successive thrust until finally—as the blades dipped—Scott felt them strike bottom. A moment later the keel of the dinghy grated soundlessly on sand, and the little boat came to rest.

Ames climbed out at the stern, and splashing through water almost up to his sea-boots' top, went forward to the bows. Stooping, he dragged the bows out of the water. Ann and Scott followed him, staggering against the wind.

"God, what a pull!" said Scott. "Didn't think my back would last out. What do we do now?"

"I want to see the lie of the sand first," said Ames, his back to the drive of the rain and the wind.

"Right." Scott nodded. "Then what about dragging the dinghy up to the highest part of the sand, and waiting there till the tide floods it?"

"Better keep her in the water," said Ames wisely. "They may come back."

"We wouldn't be any the worse off," said Ann fatalistically. "If they find us they find us."

"If we're afloat and the engine starts," said Ames, "we've still got a reasonable chance. We can take the dinghy across shoals that they couldn't risk—and with the wind behind us we might make a run for it."

"Might," said Scott gloomily. "Still, we've got to give ourselves every chance. What do we do then?"

"You go along the water's edge for a couple of hundred yards that side," said Ames, pointing. "I'll take this side. I want to find out if we're on the main sand, or on a spit. Best to be certain. Ann, keep her nose up on the sand as the water rises, we won't be a couple of minutes." He turned and trotted purposefully away.

Scott hesitated a moment, said, "You'll be all right." And trotted off in his turn.

Ames was back first. "It's the main sand," he said positively, and, stooping down, freed the light boat anchor.

Scott came back. "Sand and more sand," he said. "Nothing else."

"All right," Ames nodded. "Now, I'm going to take the hook as far up the bank as the line will let us, and we can float to it and haul in as the tide rises. We'll keep in sheltered water that way and two of us will be able to sleep while the other watches. When we've hauled in to the anchor we can walk it up the sand again until it covers. See?"

He turned and marched staggeringly into the eye of the wind.

Scott paid out the line until only a fathom remained, he made that fast to a thwart and waited. Ames came trotting back, guided by the line. "Rain's lifting," he said as he

reached the boat. "Ann, get in and get some sleep. You too, Scott. I'll watch for an hour and call you."

"Wish it was the wind lifting," Scott and Ann stumbled wearily to the boat.

"You be thankful for what you get," said Ames crabbedly.

Scott grinned and insinuated himself under the dripping cover.

Ann, huddled up on the bottom boards in the dark put out a hand to him as he settled down beside her.

"Well?" she said.

"A damn' long way from it," said Scott. "Still, it might be worse. By all the laws of chance we ought to be dead by now, and I'd rather be cold than drowned, any day."

"Do you think they'll come back?"

"I don't think, I'm sure they will," said Scott. "But whether they'll find us in this blindness is another matter. Depends on the strength of that damned eye of theirs, I suppose. Oh, damn science, damn it all to the bottom of the Black, Black Deep. If only this infernal wind will drop."

"Uncle Henry says——"

"I hope to God he's right," said Scott irritably. "Go to sleep, Ann. Why in the name of heaven did I ever let you come on this jaunt. I've been cursing myself for the triple-dyed fool I am all the night."

"You couldn't have kept me away," said Ann calmly. "We'll pull through this, Scott. I'm not scared—really."

"Oh, go to sleep," said Scott ungallantly. "I am."

Ames clambered in at the stern, and the floor boards groaned. From the stygian darkness under the cover they could see his black bulk against the faintly less absolutely blackness of the sky.

The little boat was utterly still for three long minutes. Then she swung uneasily, and the sand below the keel grated. A moment later she swung again, and the sand rustled. Then the rustle ceased and she was afloat.

Ames sat on in the stern, watchful and silent, his back half-turned to the wind, the collar of his oilskins pulled high against his bowed head.

The rain grew steadily less.



CHAPTER XV

It was not possible to sleep. The dinghy was steady enough save when she slewed from side to side on the sudden urge of wind or tide, but the wind whistled through the openings in the improvised decking, and below the floor boards the water swilled and gurgled at every tiny movement. When Ames, on watch, beat his hands together to fight the cold, the whole boat trembled. Scott and Ann were both awake when he kicked out with his foot and bending down, whispered, "Wake up."

Scott wormed his way out between thwart and canvas. There was no need for explanations—far away and faint he could hear the beat of that damnable engine. The night was clear now—when the rain might have helped them. The bright flash of the lightship in the Barrow Deep seemed tantalisingly close. There was nothing moving near it—no sign of a ship's lights.

As he straightened himself, Scott whispered, "Can you see anything?"

Ames shook his head.

They sat listening in silence. The horns of the lightships were still, the wind had dropped a little. There was only the slow roar of the surf along the further side of the sands and the terrible, ominous mutter of the engine somewhere in the darkness to leeward.

Ames was busy with the cover of the outboard. Silently and swiftly he stripped it off, adjusted the air vent, flooded the carburettor. The string of the starter was in place.

Slowly, very slowly, the mutter of the exhaust crept towards them. Ames motioned towards the anchor line, and Scott took it off the cleat where it had been made fast, and held it in his hand.

"Get ready to cut," whispered Ames. "As soon as the engine starts. If we can keep in the shoal they can't get to us—and *they* may get ashore." He gathered the end of the starting string in his hand.

The distant mutter of the engine went on. Scott realised suddenly that it was no longer growing louder. For a full minute it seemed to hold the same strength—then, quite definitely, it diminished a fraction. Another minute and it was clearly further away, less distinct, less ominous.

Without speaking, Ames began to pull the cover on the outboard again.

Scott belayed the anchor line.

Ann, sitting still on the bottom boards, but with her head thrust through the canvas, said softly, "Missed us."

Scott nodded. "Zigzagging out to sea. We'll give 'em five minutes to get right out of hearing then we'll leg it inshore—eh, skipper? The wind's falling."

Ames nodded heavily. "We've got a chance now."

Slowly, very, very slowly the noise died away. In silence they waited for it to go. The wind was dropping steadily now, each gust was less vicious, less threatening than its predecessor. Hope came as it dropped. The difficulties were lessening, the dangers diminishing. If the enemy had passed them it could only mean that the eye had not picked them up. Whatever the suspicions—and presumably the return of the hunters meant that they had discovered the emptiness of the sinking *Shannon*—there could be no certainty. If the eye had missed them it meant that it was not infallible. With each few minutes now the sea would drop. With each smooth patch between the gusts their chances of escape rose swiftly, certainly, triumphantly.

Ann in the darkness put out her hand and grasped Scott's. Silently he returned its pressure, Ann was never demonstrative, the little movement spoke more eloquently than a long protestation of thankfulness. Ames rubbed his hands together, ceaselessly and softly, less against the cold than on account of his excitement.

The five minutes dragged through; Ames, without a word, began to take the cover off the outboard again. Once more he went cautiously over the adjustments. There was no slightest sound of the hunt.

When it was all ready he stood up, lifted his head and listened for a moment, and then took the end of the starting line. With a quick, strong movement he swung the engine. It coughed throatily and failed to respond. He swung it again, winding the line hurriedly. At the fourth swing the engine fired once or twice and died again. It was cold, sticky, bound to balk at first. He swung again.

For three minutes he wrestled with it, then suddenly there was a deep, full-throated roar. For a moment he fiddled with the controls, racing it up until the dinghy quivered with the speed of it, then he put a hand on Scott's shoulder. "Let go," he said.

Scott slashed with his open knife at the line, and the dinghy fell away. Instantly Ames let in the clutch. The little boat went forward with a jerk. He thrust over the tiller and she swung parallel with the line of the sand and began to drive upriver, the tide beneath her, the sea calm in the shelter of the great bank.

They were racing to safety now. The Gods were on their

side again—the Gods of sea and wind and weather. The strong roar of the little outboard motor drove them—the bows cocked up on a double plume of spray—magnificently urgent.

For a time the sand ran straight, very faintly they could see the line between it and the water in the gloom. Then suddenly the outboard kicked up, checked and spluttered angrily. Ames swung the tiller viciously and the little boat headed into deeper water. Immediately he eased the engine down on its pivot, and the roar of its exhaust took up undiminished.

The sand stood out towards the channel in a long spit here. Steadily they were forced further and further into the Black Deep. Twice the little protective fin that guarded the racing screw dragged on the shoal, and each time Ames edged the boat away swiftly. After the third touch he stood into deep water—the risk was too great. They lost the edge of the sand, the sea beneath them became restless, but Ames held on with undiminished speed. Finally, with a backward glance at the Barrow Deep light he straightened out the dinghy on her course again.

And even as he did so they saw the hunt.

They could hear nothing. The roar of their own engine, the chattering vibration of every loose thing in the hard-pressed dinghy killed outer sound, but they saw suddenly, ghostly white in the darkness, the high white bows, mounted on a V of spray.

Ames saw them first, and as he saw them thrust the helm over. The dinghy hurtled round, heeling so wildly to one side that it seemed as if she must capsize. For an agonising moment the heel continued, then as swiftly she settled down to an even keel again. And as she settled Ann and Scott saw the enemy.

In that fraction of time everything was changed. Once again they were the hunted, the wretched hare desperate before the muzzle of the greyhound, the hard-breathed fox, breathless before the pack. The high hope, the exultation were wiped out even with the speed of the turn. Fear took their place, and the shoal water became a place of perilous sanctuary.

They plunged towards it through the little seas. Running with them, they had not noticed them; now they came at them like enemies. They buffeted the little boat, clouds of spray flung over them, whipping back in Ames's eyes, sluicing past Scott's head.

Furiously, almost frantically they pounded through the chop. And almost frantically they gained the shoal. The engine was jarred up on its pivot once again, but this time they felt it

not with anger but with thankfulness. Once again Ames turned, but this time he kept to the line of the shoal, abjuring the deep water.

For a while they raced along it, the faint line of the division between sea and sand once more visible in the darkness. Outside, in the deeper water, the grey ghost of the hunt fled along with them. They could see it plainly enough now, forty feet or so away, a long lean ghost, the glass of its wheel-house windows throwing back, sometimes, the flash of the Barrow Deep. At its bows the spray stood high, astern trailed a wake of tumbled water. They could hear nothing of its engines even now above their own roar—they could see nothing of its people.

This chase was no longer so occultly terrifying as the long herding through the rain—but it held a sharper fear, a more imminent danger.

The end came suddenly. Abruptly the sand turned to the north in a long, deep bay. A vicious little sea ran down the bay white-capped and menacing.

They ran into the first one and the dinghy checked, staggering. She picked up speed again and butted through the next. The third was bigger still, it broke over the bows in a flurry of driven spray, raced past them gunwale high, and rose at the stern even as the dinghy's bows flung up again. The broken water swirled up and over the engine. It misfired, fired again, spluttered feebly, and was dead.

Instantly Ames put the helm hard down and turned her in to the land. At the same time he jerked the deep propeller as high out of the water as the pivot permitted. The dinghy ran in, her speed dropping with alarming swiftness. In the eerie silence of the moment they could hear the roar of the enemy outside.

Then the keel grated for a moment. Instantly Scott was over the side, up to his knees in water. With a powerful heave he dragged the dinghy up, and the others tumbled out after him. "What now?" he asked, turning instinctively to the old man.

"Fight them off," said Ames defiantly.

Scott laughed involuntarily at the tone—though there was small place for laughter in their plight.

"Right," he said. "Let's get the dinghy as far up the sand as we can, then it'll give us a bit of cover. There isn't any anywhere else. Can you do anything with the engine?"

"I'm going to try," said Ames. "Water in the carburettor, of course—and the plugs are wet too, but there's a chance."

The three of them lifted the dinghy bodily and walked it up the slope. There was not far to go. They settled it

broadside on to the water, and turning, peered into the darkness for the enemy.

The grey ghost was lying silent, twenty yards or so off the water's edge. "Shall I warn her off with a bullet?" asked Scott.

Ann said, "Wait. We'll need all we've got later. One bullet won't send them away now."

Together Scott and Ames began to work on the engine. It was unlikely that the water had got into the petrol tank, but the rest of the engine was drowned, all the leads were wet, it was more than possible that the magneto in the fly-wheel was wet as well.

For seven minutes the other boat let them work in peace. Ann, who watched while they worked, mechanically drying the parts they handed to her, could hear no sound. No sign of life showed in the grey hull that hung against the absolute blackness of the night to leeward.

Then, very slowly—the engines running so quietly that they could not hear the noise upwind—she began to edge in to the shore. Ann was for a minute or so uncertain of her progress—at length she said quietly to the men, "They're coming in."

Ames said, "Get behind the boat, Ann." Crouching in the frail shelter, they watched the slow approach. The grey boat crept in steadily, feeling for the sand. Finally she stopped. "Aground," said Ames softly; "must be. She couldn't possibly float further in. What now?"

"D'you think they'll try to rush us?" demanded Scott.

"Wait and see," said Ames. "Any advantage there is, we've got."

There was no sign from the grey boat, however. No movement. All that showed that she was alive was the backward flash of the light of the Barrow Deep from her wheel-house glass as she swung uneasily in the tideway. After a moment or two she slewed until half her length showed. Evidently the tide had her by the heel. Her motors roared for a moment or two and she came back in line with them, the narrow bows pointing straight at them, the flare of the hull thrusting out on either side, the glass of the wheel-house topping it all like eyes set far back on the skull of some monstrous crab.

"She's just creeping in with the tide," said Ames at length. "Moving up every time she finds a bit of water under her. I think it's time we started things up."

"A volley at the wheel-house windows?" asked Scott.

"As good as the next thing," said Ames. "We've got three guns. I'll take the middle of the window, you take the starboard, Ann, and you the port. Then if she slews

round till she's about broadside on, let her have another volley on the waterline. Ought to be able to get through her plating at this range. Might make 'em think a bit. Ready?"

Scott said, "Give 'em a stiff neck if we break the glass, even if it doesn't do anything else. I'm ready."

"You, Ann?"

"Ready."

"Right. One—two—three."

The little volley broke out, slightly ragged, on the word. Three long spurts of flame, three quick cracks. So near was the grey boat that they heard the crash of the bullets as they hit the glass. There was no possibility of seeing what damage was done, but the grey boat began to swing, almost at once. Quickly, as she swung, Scott smashed the windows along the side of the wheel-house. Still she swung. She was almost broadside on.

"Waterline," said Ames. The spurt of shots began again. They heard the clang of the bullets come back. Still there was no sign from the grey boat. Scott sent a singleton through the wheel-house again. "Trouble is they're probably crouching down below the deck level," he said. "Still, keep 'em occupied. I'm reloading."

While he thrust in the new clip, Ames put another shot through the wheel-house. As he did so the engines began to roar again. The enemy was backing out, stern first off the sand and away from the stab of the automatics.

"They're going." Ann's voice was almost hysterical. "They're going. I wonder if we hit anybody?"

"They'll come back."

"Meanwhile let's get on with the job," said Scott.

They rose out of their shelter. Ames stretched for the plug he had been working on. Instantly from the grey boat came the stutter of a light machine gun. It fired a burst of perhaps twenty shots and was silent again. The bullets whistled past them. They struck nowhere.

Scott dropped behind the boat again, pulling Ann down. Ames dropped with them. "Tommy gun," said Scott bitterly. "They can outrange us. So what?"

The engines of the grey boat roared again. She was manœuvring for position somewhere. Presently they stopped. The gun began again, firing methodically in short bursts.

One burst whipped in the sand just clear of the stern, another flighted past just above their heads.

"Lie flat," said Scott. "Don't want to give 'em any more target than we can help."

As if to punctuate his words a burst of bullets crashed into the boat, with a sound like a pneumatic riveter.

"No point in cleaning the plugs now," said Scott calmly.

"'Nother burst like that and she won't float in treacle. There they come."

For ten minutes the steady, remorseless searching out continued. Three times bullets came through the dinghy's hull, but every time they came through spent, dropping hot on the sand beside the three.

It was terribly cold behind the little boat. There was no shelter from the wind, the sand was wet, the air itself was charged with moisture. Ann shivered painfully, striving to keep her teeth from chattering. Scott broke their silence. "We've got to move, or freeze," he said. "They're hitting the boat with every burst now. If we run for it we'll be out of the line of fire in a second or two. I doubt whether they can see us."

"Wait a little," said Ames slowly. "It's getting thick again, has been for the last five minutes."

"What does that mean?"

"Fog," said Ames. "Rain's over, wind's dropping, now we'll have fog."

"Think they'll try to rush us when it comes?"

"They may," said Ames; "but all they've really got to do is to drive us away from the boat—the sand won't last much longer. That's what they're trying to do now."

"And then?" said Ann softly.

"We swim," said Ames evenly.

"Listen. The engines," said Ann.

The low roar of the grey boat's exhaust came clearly up the wind to them.

"Coming in again," said Ames. "Or shortening the range to make certain."

"Coming in to see if we are dead yet," said Scott. He turned and looked behind him. "Can't see the Barrow Deep light any more."

"I know," said Ames; "it went three minutes ago. The fog must be between us and the ship or we'd have heard the horn."

"They're coming in to finish us off before the fog comes down," said Scott with sudden certainty. "Are you loaded up?"

Scott and Ann nodded.

The mutter of the engines was close now. The grey boat was nosing her way in again, her progress seemed uncertain, indecisive. Scott listened keenly, there had been no shots for two minutes now. Cautiously he thrust his head round the stern of the dinghy and stared out. He could see the grey boat clearly now—she was almost as close as when they had fired. There was much more water now, they would be able to get much closer without difficulty.

Slowly she crept in and in. Silently Scott watched her. After a little he said, "Stand by."

Ann crawled to the end of the dinghy and peered round the bow.

She was very close in when Scott said softly, "Now!" Ames rose to his knees. Without further order they began to shoot, swiftly and carefully, aiming all the time at the dark wheel-house.

From the grey boat came a high scream, and then silence, as Scott emptied his magazine the tommy gun answered them, however. The stream of bullets tore past them and Ames swore suddenly and dropped.

Ann, reloading her automatic, turned to him.

"All right," he said; "grazed my shoulder, that's all, no harm done."

The grey boat had stopped. The tommy gun was still searching, searching blindly, feeling its way up and down the length of the little boat, sending its stream of bullets into the empty air above it.

Closer and closer the grey boat crept. The dinghy was shelter now only when the bullets struck against a thwart, or a rib, or some solid fitting in the hull. The bullets went through the skin planking as if it had not been there.

As one sang past his head Scott said, "Too hot."

"Much," said Ann.

"Run for it," said Scott.

"Wait," said Ames. "Fog's just about here."

They endured the agony for another minute. It lengthened to two minutes. Still they were not hit. They were no longer shooting—the range was too short and their shelter too precarious. The big boat's engines roared again—and even as they began, a tongue of grey vapour stole down on the dinghy and swallowed them up.

"Now," said Scott, half-rising.

Ames pressed him to the ground again. "Wait," he said. "They'll guess at that—listen."

The gun was still firing, but the bullets were no longer crashing into the dinghy; instead they were whistling viciously out over the sand. For another long minute Ames held them down. The fog half-cleared again and Scott, thrusting his head to the stern again, saw the grey boat almost on top of them, not more than ten yards away. Her engines were still racing, but she was stationary, apparently hard ground.

As the next arm of the fog flung over them, Ames whispered, "Now!"

They ran, doubled up, and half-turning, fired as they ran—a ragged, uncertain volley. Some of the bullets hit, they

could scarcely miss at that range. There was no sign of damage.

The tommy gun searched blindly through the fog for them, bullets whistled, nothing hit them. Behind them they heard a sudden splashing in the water.

CHAPTER XVI

'WE'VE done 'em this time,' said Ames after three minutes of hard running. 'Can't be enough of 'em in that barge to make a proper search of the sands in this fog.'

'Good as far as it goes,' said Scott softly. 'And as far as the sand goes—but when it's gone?' He whistled sardonically. They were past fear now—they were past hope too. The last faint flicker of it had gone out while they lay behind the slender shelter of the dinghy on the cold wet sand. There was nothing now but to fight it out to the end. Perhaps when the sand narrowed, at the end, they might come close enough to their pursuers to make the last fight even.

Ames stopped them again. 'They're smashing the dinghy,' he said. 'Listen.'

In the dark of the fog they could hear wood splintering, and the clang of one of their improvised air tanks.

They had kept close to the water's edge. It would be easy to find the dinghy again—for a moment or two they had the advantage. 'Let's go back and shoot them off,' said Scott. 'Better shoot than be shot at.'

They ran back silently. The fog was thicker than ever. The sound of the splintering grew louder and louder, suddenly to seaward they could hear voices; the grey boat was close to them. The hacking and smashing went on, they could hear voices there too. They slowed to a walk, crept forward, their feet noiseless on the smooth sand. A shape loomed up in the fog, and Scott and Ames fired simultaneously. There was a yell that ended in a strangled cough. A gun answered them—not the machine gun. They fired at the half-seen flash. They were lying on the sand now, the spurts of flame from their automatics flashed bleakly against the driving white of the fog, and were gone even before the whip-crack of the shot was over.

The gun stopped firing, and Ames took Scott by the shoulder and urged him to his feet. Ann rose with Scott. Led by Ames they ran inland, away from the water for thirty feet. They could see nothing at all now, could hear nothing, the men at the dinghy were silent, waiting for the next move.

It came with a burst from the sub-machine gun. They heard no bullets—presumably the boat was firing at the place where they had been. Then a man called from her deck. The wind had dropped now to little more than a strong breeze; though they could not hear the words, they could hear the voice plainly. From the dinghy a voice shouted back, "*Nein!*"

Again the voice called from the boat. This time there was no answer.

The fog thinned, and they saw the hull of the dinghy dimly. There was no sign of life near it. Another burst of vapour hurled itself at them. Scott felt terribly cold—an inner coldness that had nothing to do with the coldness of his body. His nerves were taut, like strained steel wire. Every muscle was braced for some blow that he felt must fall. Every sense was forced to the last point of acuteness.

They heard splashing again, and a short word or two of command. The grey boat's engines went ahead again, slowly. The water was close to the dinghy now, the sand was narrowing. The mutter of the surf—dying now with the falling wind—was very close at hand. The slashing in front of them began again. There were more men this time. Plainly those on the grey boat had decided to make an end of things. Still they stood silent, waiting.

Suddenly Scott was inspired. "Can't be many left on the boat," he whispered. "Let's try to get her . . ."

Ann caught his arm in a sudden burst of emotion. He could feel the fire in her, the urgent leaping at this slender chance.

Ames led them wordlessly to the right for twenty yards, then down to the sea-line again. They found it more swiftly than they had expected, the tide was racing up now. Swiftly they went back along it, peering blind into the fog ahead of them. There was no sign of the men who had left the grey boat, no sign of the boat herself. After a few yards, however, they found something lying half in and half out of the water. Ames kicked against it, almost stumbling. He bent and felt down . . . the outboard motor . . . they must be almost at the dinghy. He caught at the other two and turning, began to wade into the water.

Somewhere in the fog behind them they heard a click—as if some one was cocking an automatic.

Then, far to the left, they heard the sound of a shot. Clearly the men from the boat had separated. Some one was shooting at a gull, or the squelch of his own boots in the sand, or a trick of the wind.

They waded thigh deep, but there was no sign of the grey boat. No sound.

They waited silent. Still there was no sign. Ames shook his head suddenly, a puzzled gesture. He turned and led them against the tide—up the line of the sand. Still there was no sign. They went through the water for perhaps fifteen yards, moving terribly slowly to avoid the rip and rustle of water against their legs. And then, far away behind them, they heard the clink of metal on metal.

Instantly Ames faced about. They went down the tide as swiftly as they dared. It was getting deeper every moment, the rush of it under their feet made their progress difficult, they staggered drunkenly, clutching at each other. The grey boat loomed up out of the fog long before they thought it possible.

Swiftly they edged closer and closer. Her engines were running very slowly, a faint put-putting noise came from the exhausts. They were keeping her bow firmly to the edge of the sand, she was swung half-round by the run of the tide so that her stern was nearer them than her bow.

Ames raised his automatic, took deliberate aim at the wheel-house, and fired. This time there was no crash of shattered glass. But even as Scott's bullet followed his, there came a spurt of flame and the stutter of the sub-machine gun. Ames stumbled and recovered himself, groaning a little. "No use," said Scott bitterly. "Can't face that. Come on. You hit, skipper?"

They ran for the shoal water and the sand. The kindly fog swallowed them. From the ship somebody began to shout in a high-pitched voice, "*Zuruck, zuruck—kom zuruck—hierher.*" The voice was urgent, commanding, a formidable threatening voice.

There was an answering shout. Scott fired at the sound and turning, fired back at the invisible boat. The shot hit metal, and they heard the whine of the ricochet.

Ann followed them like a ghost, silent, feverish, tense.

They reached the dry sand and ran—ran blindly across the sand. It was impossible even to think now of surprising the ship. They had no reply to the machine gun. Ames was hit now too. They must rest—and think. Think of what?

The roar of the surf was very close. Through the fog a fan of whiteness rushed towards them, creaming up the slope beneath their feet. Scott realised with a sudden shock the narrowness of the sand, they could not have run more than fifty yards from the grey boat. The half-mile width of the sand was diminished to this little strip.

They stopped, helpless. Ann said, "Are you badly hurt, Uncle Henry?"

The old man grunted. "No!" he said. "Nothing to worry about. Caught my shoulder again, almost the same place as the graze earlier on—and they say a shell never lands

in the same hole twice . . . No, I'm all right. Look here, this is the last move. The boat's hopeless—and there's nothing left of the dinghy. We've got to swim for it." He chuckled grimly.

Scott grinned in the darkness. The old man was game. Never since the chase had begun had he complained, never had he pleaded his age. In this last terrible hour he had been the strength of the three of them. His had been the command.

Ames seemed to sense something of the thoughts. He said, "Don't suppose I'll last the night, but I'm not kicking. They can't say we haven't made a fight for it, anyway. Well, I'd rather this than be knocked over by a bus . . ."

Ann gasped a little.

"Don't worry, Ann," he said softly. "There's a chance still, for all of us. We've got our lifebelts, anyway. . . . Look here, if we get separated, try to keep this side of the sand. I think the tide bears this way, anyway. It'll be dawn in under the hour, and we ought to last another twenty minutes on the sand—if those swine don't get us. Always a chance of being picked up as soon as its light; tide'll take us right into the fairway. Tread water and save your breath for shouting, don't try to swim."

"What do you think they're doing?" asked Scott quietly.

"Waiting for the sand to get small enough to search. Look here, if they find us I'm going to the north end of the sand, you take the south. They won't be able to spare enough men to tackle two lots—that gives us two chances of getting clear. Look after Ann."

"I'm all right," said Ann unsteadily.

"Good. Stick it."

They moved back a little to avoid the upward surge of the breakers. The sea was dropping swiftly now, but the fog still streamed past them driving fast with the breeze. Minutes went by and there was no sign of pursuit. They were getting cold again, the chill of the fog was creeping through the flesh to the blood. Scott said, "Might as well keep warm. Anyway, we'll be better on the other side for the time being—at least, we'll be downwind of anything that comes looking for us. We can't hear a thing here. Let's go."

They crossed the narrowing sandbank swiftly. There was not more than twenty-five yards to it now, a spine that stood up out of the encroaching waters, high enough to give them promise of shelter for a little while longer—and no more. The night was still again, save for the rush of the surf and the far-away boom of the lightships' horns. Still further away there was a big steamer, caught in the smother—but there seemed astonishingly little traffic on the river to-night.

There was no sign of the grey boat, or of her people. Scott reckoned that, as they had come, they were a little to the westward of the grey boat now—unless she had gone. Hope—a faint, almost laughable hope—began to fill him again. If she had gone they might keep together still, he had a sudden horror of being separated—of losing Ann.

Then very faint and far away, he heard the sound of coins chinking. Somebody was walking along with coins rattling together unheeded in a pocket. Ames gripped his arm.

The walker came on. Nearer and nearer. It seemed as if he must brush past them—bump into them. Nearer and still nearer. Scott felt he could almost touch the coins.

Then suddenly the sound of them was growing fainter again. The thickness of the fog had let them down—the enemy was past, and the grey boat was still with them.

They began to walk, slowly and carefully, south-westward. For three minutes or so there was no sign of danger. The fog was just thin enough for them to be able to see the line of the water. Occasionally they splashed into a thin film of it, where pools seeped into the sand in advance of the rising tide, but the night was full of splashes now.

A wave ran hissing across their path suddenly. The water had come over the top of the island. Ames grunted. Then they saw that there was high ground again beyond it. The ridge was being divided into islets now, the surf had come across a divide.

They splashed through it, and instantly, on the far side, a gun flashed. Ames said, "Quick, Get into the water, let them go past. The north island's mine. Good-bye. God bless you."

He ran up the divide a little, shot twice, and then raced back into the fog.

Five men came after him, bellowing. A hoarse, animal chorus. Scott and Ann, standing still, thigh-deep in the water, heard them go by but saw nothing. Their shouting ceased after a moment, and the night went silent again. Then Ames called, "Come on, you lousy bastards. Come on—damn you." And they heard the crack of a pistol. Scott thought he saw a faint flash.

Wearily they climbed out of the water on to the last of the ridge. There was not much longer to go now, and the waves were already tearing at the summit of the sand. Ames had gone. Scott said slowly, "I wish we could have helped him to fight it out."

"He wanted us to have the extra chance," said Ann. "It isn't us, after all, it's—it's everything. Oh, Scott, what will happen if we don't get the news through?"

"Don't worry about that," said Scott evenly, "we've done

our best. Weeks will get things moving—if we don't turn up. The mist's clearing again."

For the first time since they had left the dinghy the fog lifted. In the comparative lightness they could see the whole extent of the little island on which they stood. Even the distortion of the darkness could not make it more than fifty yards long. At its broadest it was not more than ten. A channel of perhaps fifteen yards separated them from the island from which they had come. They could see the beginning of that only, the darkness hid the rest, hid the running men, hid Ames, hid the grey boat.

Very faintly they could hear his voice, far away but still challenging.

And then suddenly a brilliant light broke out a dazzling white blaze. It seemed to burst out of the sand at the far end of the dinghy island. Silhouetted in it, stark black against the brilliance, they could see the five running men. Even as it broke out one of the men stumbled and lay still, and they heard the crack of a shot. Then a second man fell. He rose to his feet again, staggered a few paces and stood still. They heard another, a third, a fourth shot. The second man fell again, and did not rise. The other three faltered. One of them ran back. The tommy gun from the boat was rattling, the three were shooting.

Scott said, "It's the skipper. He must have had that flare with him all the time. He's shooting from somewhere close to it, they can't see him for the dazzle, but he can see them."

There was a confused bellowing of voices in the distance. The three men began to run back. They picked up one of their comrades, leaving the other lying. At a shambling trot they hurried back towards the grey ship. No shots followed them out of the brilliance.

"Could we get them?"

Scott shook his head. "The flare's dying, we wouldn't have time. Besides, we can't risk it now. I think they're going—and I think the skipper's gone."

"Oh." The girl clasped his arm tightly.

"It's all right," said Scott unsteadily. "He's done what he set out to do. It would have been tragic if—if he hadn't. As it is it's—heroic!"

The flare died down, burst up suddenly near the end, and then went out. A little spark of red remained on the sand for a moment or two, then that also went out. In the utter darkness they heard the roar of the grey boat's engines. It was a more purposeful roar this time, a long, sustained noise, that died away not with the switching off of the engines, but with the disappearance of the sound in the distance.

"The skipper won," said Scott slowly. He was trembling

violently. Ann, holding his arm, was trembling too. After a moment he said, "Let's sit down—while we can."

"No," said Ann sharply. "Let's see if we can—can find him. We—may be able to—help."

"Of course," Scott shook himself, bracing himself again. "Quick, we must hurry."

They plunged into the water. In the middle of the divide it was thigh deep now as the waves rushed by them. They splashed through recklessly, not worrying about noise. Once on the firm sand they ran, hurrying along the swiftly narrowing ridge.

"Can't be much further," said Scott after a minute or two. "You take that side—I'll take this."

He walked on, staring at the dark sand. Almost at once he saw something black. He changed his direction, running towards it. Clearly in the darkness he saw that it was the body of a man, long before he reached it. As he ran he called softly to Ann.

She was with him as he dropped on one knee beside it.

"Is it him, Scott, is it him?"

Scott felt the body with his hand. "There's no lifebelt," he said immediately. "It's their man—the first one he dropped. He's dead. Callous devils—leaving him here."

Ann ran on. Something drove her to find Ames, something so urgent that she could not wait, even in the presence of death. Scott dropped the dead man's hand and followed her. Together they came to the end of the island. The sea raced beyond it, deeper even than in the divide behind them. The little waves hissed past, foaming. There was nothing to see.

They went back very slowly, their feet dragging. On the highest part of the ridge, ten yards or so beyond the dead man, they waited for what was to come.

The fog still held clear. Though they could not see the stars the night was lighter than it had been. The blink of the Barrow Deep lightship was visible again, haloed, watery, but still visible.

The tide was racing up now. Wave after wave came nearer them, ridges of betraying white that ran hissing up the sand and fell back only to come on again, further and further on each time.

The minutes went by swiftly now—though there was nothing save the blink of the light by which they might measure time. The big ship that had been bellowing so raucously out to the northward was nearer now. Still bellowing, but moving slowly. Nearer at hand, somewhere to the north-west, was a small craft. She too, was bellowing.

A wave, bigger than the rest, came racing suddenly and topped the ridge. They watched it pause on the highest part

without emotion. They were beyond that now. A little white froth trickled over the top and ran a little way, some of it splashed past their boots.

The next wave broke short of the ridge again, a good deal short—so did its follower—so did the next. It seemed almost as if the tide had turned suddenly on that last big racing comber, and then the next wave was higher again, almost to the top.

Three times the seas flirted with them, and then came a time when five waves broke across the ridge in quick succession, washing past their feet. Not spume this time, but racing water.

There was a brief respite and then the water was above the ridge. Imperceptibly the strength of the waves diminished. The tide began to run north-westward, over the ridge, killing the force of the little seas. Swiftly it rose. It was half-way up their sea-boots now even when there were no waves. It pulled at their legs, washed the sand from under their feet, settling them in an uneasy bed. Again and again they moved. It grew deeper in rushes. In a moment it was at their knees. Then it stayed there for a while and climbed suddenly half-way up their thighs. In this pause Scott said, "I've got a couple of yards of line here, Ann. I think we'd better tie ourselves together. It isn't as if we were going to try to swim. What do you think?"

"Oh, please, Scott. Please. I couldn't bear to lose you now."

"Afraid, Ann?" His voice was suddenly wonderfully tender.

"Only of losing you. I—I don't mind the rest now."

"Don't worry," he said. "We're not done yet. While we float there's a chance, and there's no earthly reason why we should sink with the belts. Thank God the water's not too cold. Warmer in than out to-night." He tried to make his voice cheerful. For himself, he could see no vestige of hope. It seemed mad to struggle. Mad to prolong in agony their last minutes. Inevitably they must die, the chances of rescue were more slender than imagination could make them—and yet . . . They couldn't give in now. With Ames's example in front of them they must fight it out to the very last second. Ames had thought there was a chance; otherwise he would have gone with them. Moreover, there was the news . . . they no longer owned their own bodies . . . they were forfeit to the news.

Slowly he made one end of the line fast to Ann's waist. Then he passed the other round himself. The water came in with another rush and was up to their waists as his hands tied the last knot. They were being forced off the ridge now, forced into deeper water by the run of the tide. It took too much

energy to fight against the incessant drag of it. The pull and suction, the loosening of the sand.

Another run brought it above their waists and as it did so Ann stumbled, lost her footing, and was swept to the end of the cord.

"No use waiting," said Scott, and stumbled a pace or two forward until he too, floated.

For a second or so the toe of his boot dragged along the ground, then he had a moment or two in which he could touch it. Then it was gone.

He pulled himself up to the girl. "All right, Ann?" he asked.

"I'm all right," she said quietly. "Shall I kick my seaboots off?"

"You're floating high enough without," said Scott easily. "Shouldn't worry. They'll keep you warmer. I'm keeping mine on. This isn't too bad, Ann, is it?"

"While we float there's hope," said Ann gallantly.

CHAPTER XVII

THE fog closed down on them silently. The world immediately shut in to the little ring of black water they could see. There was nothing in it save only themselves. They did not talk—to talk was to risk swallowing the green, cold Thames water. They drifted slowly, spinning round and round. Far away in the fog the lightship trumpeted steadily, four deep blasts and then silence, then four deep, low blasts again.

They kept direction by her, though at times it was hard to tell whence, out of the welter of fog and sea, the four blasts came. She was their only link with the wider world. The big ship had disappeared, the incessant rustle and murmur of the water drowned out the lesser noises of the Estuary—the far horns and the smaller shipping. For a time it was certain that they were getting nearer to her. The sound was louder, more insistent. Then for a long time there was no change. Strangely they were less cold than in the last bitter minutes on the sand-bank. Here in the water the bite of the wind cut only at their faces—and the wind was dropping still, the fog no longer raced past them, it seemed to drift, sliding silently over them, a little above the wave tops. Their clothes appeared to enclose immediately about their bodies a layer of water that was almost warm, only their hands chilled all the time. The waves worried them very little. They were scarcely more now than tiny swells, smooth topped, not steep; little movements of the water that lifted them up, dipping them seldom, slipping away

from them mostly with a rustle and a shower of spray above the lifebelts.

The long minutes went by. They spun slowly round and round. The fog lifted again, but even now they could not see the light. Nothing showed in their narrow circle. There was only more water, more emptiness.

Ann began to shiver again, terribly. Her teeth rattled, a tiny noise that came clear in the night, like small castanets. Against her own will she said suddenly, "I'm so cold, Scott. So cold."

"Right," he said. "That can't go on. This is where we start on the brandy. If I can get at it. He raised his hands out of the water—the buoy still held him up—and began to rub them, trying to get life back into the numbed fingers.

For three long minutes he rubbed, then he said, "Think I can manage now." He began to fumble at the buttons of his oilskin coat. They fought him with the stubbornness of inanimate matter, his hands grew numb again as he struggled, but finally he got them loose. The bottle was in the outer pocket of his jacket. It involved another long struggle to get at that, but he got it out eventually, then—with the precious thing safe—he rested for a minute or two.

He moved the cork with his teeth; it was not tight, but the awkwardness of the action, the danger of getting the life-giving fluid mixed with sea water, or of pouring it away altogether left him shaken.

When he had pulled himself together he said to Ann, "Can you draw yourself towards me?"

She came in slowly, hauling herself along the line.

"How are your hands, can you hold the bottle?"

"I think so."

"Right, here it comes. Get your hands on it first. Can you feel it? Sure that's all right? Good, watch your chance, wait for a little smooth. All right—now."

Ann put the neck of the bottle between her numbed lips and tilted her head back. She took a gulp of the strong spirit. It ran like fire down her throat—burning. She gasped, coughed faintly, and drank again. "That's enough," she said. "You drink."

"Don't mind if I do?" said Scott, with a wan attempt at lightness.

The brandy put life into both of them. They could feel the fierce spirit working. Could feel the warm glow that ran outwards until it seemed to battle with the very cold of the sea against their skins.

The wind had almost vanished now, the sea moved easily under the fog, slowly, gently. They could not see how fast they were drifting, could not see where. They might have

stayed in one place for all the time since they left the sand, but for the altering noise of the lightship's horn. There was no way of telling whether the tide was turning, whether it was slack water, how far they were from the sand

They drifted on. The glow of the brandy vanished slowly. The cold began to eat in again. Scott heard the ship first. . . . Heard it far away as the beat of propellers through the water. They picked out its horn a moment after, out of the medley of little sounds that reached them now the water was still.

It came closer swiftly, moving against the tide, out to sea. Suddenly they permitted themselves to hope again. The horn seemed very close, Scott realised that they must have been hearing it, half-consciously, long before the propeller thresh, mingled and confused with the lightship's warning note.

Closer and closer. It seemed on top of them now, shattering the fog somewhere just out of sight—and it was still coming closer. Little gusts of wind began to blow again, driving the fog. Patches of it split. Suddenly the night was becoming grey. They could see long distances up the openings as the wind broke through, but they could see nothing of the ship. Only the roar of the horn came nearer and nearer. Scott said, "I'm going to shout." He lifted his cold hands from the water, made a trumpet mouth of them in the direction of the ship, and shouted, "Aho-ooy"—the long-carrying note of the sea. The first shout was little more than a croak. The second carried. He found the full power of his lungs. "Aho-ooy. Help. Aho-ooy."

The roar of the horn reached a maximum and began to fade. "Aho-ooy," he went on shouting. Ann remained curiously still.

The horn was less now at every blast. The beat of the propeller began to fade too. Scott said, "Look out for the wash."

But the wash was a long time coming. Once, before it came, he said, "Must have been further away than we thought."

The triple waves hit them at length. Submerging them at the third wave in a wild and frightening flurry of water. The ship was almost out of hearing now, lost against the background noises of the fog. "She must have passed us almost a quarter of a mile away," said Scott wonderingly. "I could have sworn she was on top of us."

After a slow start the dawn came suddenly—some lightening of the fog let the grey morning light through with a rush. Ann's face looked terribly blue—purple, almost, round the lips. The skin drawn and swollen, her hands the cold yellow of a corpse.

"More brandy?" said Scott.

"I can hang on a little longer."

"Good girl! The next one will come close enough to hear us, and the fog's clearing."

They drifted on, the circle narrowed down again as the dawn wind died—they could see perhaps thirty yards in the greyness, outside that everything was blank. The fog was not lifting.

Ann said, after a while, "Scott, when does the tide turn?"

"Just about now," said Scott slowly.

"Then?"

"Don't know, Ann. Still, we're in the fairway, and that's the main thing, the tide won't take us back on the sand, I'm afraid, but, anyway, we don't want it to. We'll be picked up."

"I hope so."

"Meaning you don't think so?"

"I'm so cold, Scott."

"Brandy, my dear."

"I'll wait."

"Take it now, doesn't do to hold out too long. Pull yourself in."

The strong spirit burnt its way down again. It felt to their cold bodies as if it was hot of itself, a fierce burning, stinging sensation. They no longer cared about the tide. The light-ship began to come slowly nearer again. The wind had gone altogether now and the fog hung over an oily sea. Slowly it grew lighter, slowly the grey gave place to a dead, dull white. They drifted on, spinning slowly all the time. The cold was eating through them now despite the warm layer under their clothes, despite the brandy, despite the treading of the dull green water. Though they listened until their cold ears hurt there was no sign of anything near them. Now that the fog had closed down thick again everything was anchored. Nothing moved on the river.

They drifted on. Slowly, deliberately, Scott trod water. It was not necessary to do so to keep his head above the surface, but the movement seemed to give him the illusion of warmth, the illusion of effort. Ann had stopped. She was growing steadily weaker. The long exposure after leaving the *Shannon* and on the sandbank had sapped her vitality, now the cold and the utter, hopeless despair was finishing the work. Scott shortened the line which joined them together, pulling a rough slipknot into it.

"Stick it, old thing," he said once. "We've got to keep on going. 'Tisn't any use feeling done, we're not done yet, and we're not going to be. The fog's bound to lift some time. I wonder if the skipper's still trying . . ."

The remembrance of Ames woke Ann to a brief new phase of energy. She trod water vigorously, rubbed her yellowed, water-wrinkled hands together, even smiled at Scott with lips that would not obey their nerves.

And at the end of the spell, just as she began—half-consciously—to relapse into inanimate despair again, she saw the buoy.

It loomed in the fog first as a tall, dark shape. Within a moment or so it was a high, chequer-boarded mass. It seemed to be racing towards them. Shouldering up out of the grey-green sea. It was perhaps thirty yards away.

Ann pointed dumbly and Scott, floating with his back towards it, kicked himself slowly round.

Even as he saw it he shouted. A wild, incoherent, tumultuous shout. "Swim, Ann; swim," he said after the first moment. "Oh, for God's sake swim. We've got to reach it—we've got to reach it. It's our chance at last. Our only chance. Swim! Swim!"

He began to kick out himself. The tide was drifting them perhaps ten yards clear of the buoy; before they passed it they had to make good this ten yards, to force numbed muscles and deadened nerves to drive them through the water so that they floated up against the tremendous steel can.

They had been close together when Ann saw the buoy—now Scott, galvanising his cold limbs to swift, determined action—moved rapidly from her. The line checked him after a moment. Its feeble pull was enough to halt the impetus of his strokes. Ann was not swimming. He turned to her and shouted. Suddenly he swore at her, a torrent of abuse, scorn, railing. In the instant of time he realised that she had to be made to swim, had to be made to force her legs to answer her, to break out of the numb lethargy of the cold.

The brandy might have done it, but there was no time to go through the long struggle with the bottle. No time for it to warm her, to spurt her flagging nerves.

He pulled savagely at the line. She was looking at him dumbly, floundering in a wordless desperation. As they came together again he shouted against her face: "Swim, damn you, Ann; swim." And lifting his arm, cuffed the side of her head.

The blow seemed to shake her out of her stupor. Grimly she kicked out beside him. He swam more strongly now. Anger, hope, urgent necessity seemed to have given him strength. The tide was rushing them down. As they crawled in a slow diagonal across it the buoy seemed to be hurtling up. It appeared impossible that they should reach it in time, certain that their heaven, their hope of safety would be swirled away from them at the last moment.

And then somehow they were against it. The great red and white chequer-board hung over them like a cliff. The tide rushed past it, muttering. They were flung limply against the metal. With a last tremendous effort, Scott pushed Ann

away from him, and she drifted out to one side, while he himself clawed wildly to the other. The tide held them there, one on either side of its dividing point, hard up against the thin green weed and the fine barnacles of the bottom of the buoy. The little seas shouldered them up and down. Scott's hand was caught between his body and the metal, and when he got it free was raw and bleeding from the contact with the little shells.

Safety was high above them, astonishingly, desperately high. The buoy stood out of the water like the side of a ship. The side sloped inward a little, but it was deadly smooth. Rivets stood out as faint projections, scarcely enough to give even an ape foothold. The full length of his reach, even when he thrust himself—clawing at the shells—out of the water, was perhaps three feet. The flat top, the haven out of the water, the promise of safety, was eight feet away. Only the doubtful ridge of the edging round the water-line promised to help them.

For a couple of minutes he was content to rest. The exhaustion after the effort destroyed initiative. He was content to be there, to be held firmly in one place, to have contact with something solid again. To be stable.

Then the cold began to cut into him again. The heat of movement was dying in the reaction. He roused himself by an effort of will that was almost painful. Slowly, arduously he freed the brandy bottle again, drew the cork and gave himself a deep drink. He waited for a minute or two after he had replaced it, to give the spirit time to work, then he called out to Ann:

"Any way of getting up your side?"

Surprisingly she answered, "There's a ring-bolt here." Her voice was thin, it sounded as if she were very far away, terribly weak. She had to call three times before he was certain of what she said.

When he knew he shouted back, "Can you reach it?"

She said, "No."

For a moment he hung, thinking. Could he change places with her? Could he swing her round to his side so as to anchor him while he made an attempt on the ring? It had been touch and go when they first made the buoy, a very little more and the sharp run of the tide would have carried them, clawing helplessly, past the smooth side and on beyond the buoy, beyond any hope of swimming back to it, and chance of safety.

Very thinly her voice came again. "You might."

Might what? Might be able to reach the ring? He must risk it, must chance the failure. There was nothing else for it, no other hope. He began to work himself back to the

point on the buoy's circumference where the tide parted. As he went he hauled in on the line, shouting to Ann to work herself round to meet him.

She came slowly, crabbing herself feebly along the iron. It was clear that she had no strength left. Scott, with the brandy still hot within him, felt spurred to greater effort. She said quietly, "Ring-bolt. About three feet up. You might reach it—I've been trying." She held up a bleeding hand.

There was no time here on this perilous divide to offer her the brandy bottle. At any moment the buoy might spin—revolve slowly under the pressure of the tide, spin them off as a ball of mud is flung from a revolving wheel. He said, "Can you pass me? I'll push you round again."

She thrust herself out from the iron, and the tide pressed her back again. He helped her, the tide forced her back on him. Even as she was thrust against him the buoy moved uneasily. A cushion of water formed at his back, pushing him outwards, he was suddenly washed clear of the steel sheer, clear of the weed, clear of the little barnacles. For a moment he clowed wildly, trying to free himself from Ann. Already the tide was sweeping them past the buoy. He gave a tremendous thrust, pushed his knee up at the same time and kicked away. The force of the movement sent him against the iron again. He saw the ring-bolt high above him. With a last, despairing effort he launched himself out of the water, his hand reached up, grasped convulsively—and closed round the cold steel ring.

He hung there panting, as if he had rowed a long race, run a gruelling course. After a moment he felt the line jerk tight, and saw Ann out at the full length of it in the eddy behind the buoy.

Even as he saw her she began to haul herself in by the line. From some unimagined reserves she had drawn strength at last. Slowly she came up and up until he felt the strain of the line relax, and saw that she was holding herself by her finger-tips against the weed and the shells.

She said, "Pull up the slack of the line and pass the bight of it through the ring and make it fast. Then you can stand on my shoulders."

Dumbly he saw that that was the only possible thing. He passed the line through with his disengaged hand. There was still some curious warmth in his fingers. It took a long minute to get it through, and the bight fell away from him four times, but it was passed in the end. The knotting came quite simply.

When he had made the knot secure he let go his hold on the ring and sank back into the water to rest. Ann managed

a drawn smile. Her lips were blue. He said, "Another spot of brandy, my girl. You've got to work before we get to the top."

He got the bottle to her, and when she had finished took another sip himself. The most desperate part of the work was still to come.

Strangely it came almost easily. Pulling himself up by the line, he got his hands on the ring again. With a knee against the barnacles he got the other on Ann's shoulder, and then his foot. As the buoy rolled to a swell he got the free foot to the ledge, and as it rolled back he flung himself against it and thrust upwards. For a moment there was a wild scramble, then his foot braced for a second against the ring, and he was lying on the dry, flat summit of the buoy.

In the centre of it there was a little four-legged erection, surmounted by an upright bar. He thrust a foot between the legs and hung over the side. "O.K.," he shouted down. "Can you free the knots?"

The wild flush of hope that had come to him in the last minutes seemed to help Ann too. She struggled valiantly with the rope. The knots were not tight—Scott's hands were too cold to draw them tight. They came loose after three minutes or so of furious work. The rope slid free from the ring.

With Ann helping all she could, and Scott performing prodigies in his new-found strength, the girl got her foot at last to the ring.

After that it was easy.

They lay together on the flat top utterly exhausted for a while. Beneath them the buoy rolled and lurched as the little swells passed under it, and the tide swung it. The motion—from the tide, at anyrate—seemed to increase as they lay. The buoy was canted over with the pull of it so that they lay on a slope. Scott had undone the rope round his waist in the first minutes, and passed it through the legs, doubling it round so that they could not be thrown off, even by the most violent motion. There was no wind, but the fog drifted by them in slow swathes.

After ten minutes Scott was sufficiently rested to peel off his oilskin coat. It took him another five to get it clear. When it was off he took off his jacket, and spread it to dry as best it could, pulling the oilskin over his shoulders again. He made Ann take off her jersey after that and her trousers too. They sat close together for a while, huddling up for warmth, their oilskins pulled tight.

Scott, turning things over in his mind, said once, "We'd never have done it in the full run of the tide. We'd have been washed away, look at it now." Otherwise they scarcely

spoke. The wonder and amazement of their safety was still on them, and there was no room for words in it yet.

Their things dried slowly, the air was too wet to help. Ann was violently sick—reaction or the unfamiliar motion of the buoy. Scott became aware that he was most terribly hungry. The morning dragged on.

A light breeze came up and once or twice spray splashed over them, but the motion of the buoy scarcely altered. The breeze helped with their clothing. It tore the fog too, in long lanes it opened up, so that they could see for as much as half a mile in the cleared patches. But nothing showed in them.

Sometimes they lay, sometimes they sat huddled against the iron legs. The slight slope of the top against the tide, added to the faint doming, made it impossible to stay still in one position for long, moreover, Scott made them both go through elaborate kicking and arm waving to keep their circulations going. They had no way of judging the time save by the Barrow Deep horn which still boomed on, a monstrous, monotonous bellow against the fog.

Ann said, when they had reached speech again, "Where are we—do you know?"

"God knows," said Scott cheerfully. "It's a can buoy, so we're on the port hand of the channel. By the sound of the horn I reckon we're a little south and east of the Barrow Deep. There was some lettering on the buoy, but I wasn't feeling like reading when we washed up against it. God, that was a near thing, Ann. Nothing nearer! Another three yards and we'd have been gone—and God only knows where we would fetch up. There's not much between us now and the coast of Holland."

The fog closed down again, but the day was definitely warmer. It was impossible to guess at the hour.

Gradually as their clothes dried things became more bearable. Gradually their spirits rose. Ships passed, far out in the channel, but they saved their breath. Shouting was useless, for everything that passed was too far away and too preoccupied with fog to heed a voice outside.

Sooner or later something was bound to come near them—or if it didn't the fog would clear and somebody would see them from the lightship.

They sat on. They were both hungry now. Ann was thirsty too. There was a little brandy left in the bottom of the bottle, but it would not quench thirst and, moreover, it had to be saved in case of more desperate need. Both of them refused to envisage any possibility in which the brandy might be needed, but neither of them drank it.

The fog drove thin again and there were longer clear intervals. Once the sun almost came through and gave them

an idea of time. Scott put it at eight o'clock. They had tried to work out how long they had been in the water, but beyond a certainty that they had not reached the buoy before sunrise it was impossible to be certain. Ann put it at two hours, Scott thought it not more than an hour and a half.

The day dragged on. At times they forgot altogether the booming of the horn—at others it worked on their nerves. Nothing stopped it, however, the fog remained obstinately down.

Ann heard the voices first.

They were not far away, and they were not loud. Two men talking conversationally, calmly, evenly. Just too far for them to distinguish words.

Scott cupped his hands and hailed. He put all the power of his lungs into the hail—and the voices fell silent. There was a little, doubtful pause, and then one of them shouted back, "Where are ye?"

"On—the—buoy."

"Wha-a-a-t buoy?"

"God knows. What does it matter, for pity's sake take us off."

And the voice answered, "Raaaigh. I'm comin'."

Somewhere in the fog they heard the rattle of an anchor chain.

CHAPTER XVIII

THEY heard the voices again, arguing over something, then the creak of blocks, and wood bumping on wood, and a splash. The first voice hailed them again:

"Give us a shout."

"Here," bellowed Scott. "Aho-ooy . . ."

The shouting went on. In the intervals Scott could hear the thump of the oars in the thole pins, and the splash of the rowing. The fog seemed to play tricks with the sound and the rower became suddenly aggrieved. "Where th' 'ell are you?" he shouted.

"Here—on the buoy." Scott was beginning to see a faint glimmer of humour in the situation.

"And where's the blurry buoy?"

"Here," said Scott.

The splashing went on.

Quite suddenly the fog split again. In the middle of a long avenue of clear water they saw a clumsy dinghy, one man rowing it, her stern almost to them.

"Well, I be beggered," said the voice, and from somewhere in the deep fog a second voice said:

"More to your lef', Tom. More to your lef'."

"My lef' be beggered," said Tom. "I can see 'em now. What th' 'ell are you doin' on the buoy."

"Come and take us off and we'll tell you," promised Scott. "We're just about done."

The dinghy turned and came towards them, breasting the tide strongly. "Got a line?" called Tom over his shoulder.

"No," said Scott. "Heave us yours."

The dinghy came the last few yards with a rush and bumped hard against the side of the buoy, a light line slapped on the top. Scott passed it through the ring, and cut loose the line that had held them on the buoy, he helped Ann clumsily over the side, and Tom guided her feet.

"Hey, it's a woman," said Tom.

Ann smiled at him feebly and Tom was won. Scott followed her, lowering himself by the rope, and then slipped it.

"Oi, Steeeve, give us a shout. It's a chap and a girl."

He turned the dinghy's nose in the direction of the shout, swung her a little more to counteract the tide, and settled down to his rowing. "Now, what in 'ell were you doin' on that buoy. There's penalties against it, you know."

"We went ashore on the Little Sunk in the rain last night," said Scott quickly. "Got on to the sand and the tide took us off before the dawn. We swam until we drifted against the buoy—then we climbed on to it."

"Cripes," said Tom.

He called into the fog again. "Washed off the Little Sunk with the flood las' night, they was. Give us a shout, Steve."

A shape showed in the fog. High, dark-red sails and a towering mast, a little mizen aft with another red sail. In another moment the fog cleared again, the shape became a Thames barge. Across her stern in a gilded scroll was her name and port of registry. *Sunrise of Mistley*. She was deep in the water, well loaded. A man stood aft near the great iron wheel, and a little dog beside him. He waved a pipe at them cheerfully. Solemnly welcoming.

Tom said, "Told you we was near the Barrow Number Two. On the Barrow Number Two they was. Didn't I tell you. 'Tisn' no use argin', Steeeve."

"Come aboard," said Steve hospitably. "Must be cold, you must be. How did you come to be on that buoy? Yachtin'?" There was a fine inflection of scorn in the question, politely veiled.

"Yes." Scott nodded, suitably sorrowful. "You can call it yachting. Where are you bound to?"

"Harwich," said Tom.

Steve began to hustle them down to the little cabin. "Just goin' out with the ebb, we was. 'Tisn't enough wind to ruffle the fevvers on a cock angel's backside."

Scott's face fell. "Harwich," he said. "Look here, we've got to get to the admiral at Chatham absolutely as soon as possible. It's more urgent than I can say."

"Chatham," said Steve slowly. "'Tisn't 'umanly possible."

"But we must."

"With this wind and *this* tide. Should've reckoned you knew all about this tide by now."

Scott groaned. The men were right, of course it was impossible. At Harwich he would be able to telephone through—and yet . . . "I'd give fifty pounds to be put ashore at the dockyard in the next couple of hours."

"Fifty pounds is a lot o' money," said Steve politely. "Of course you and your young lady must be terrible cold, but there isn't no call to go spending fifty pound. Tom 'e's getting you a cup o' tea and 'e'll probably lash up an egg and a bit of bacon. . . . You'll be all right, and you can get the train back to London from Harwich comfortable."

"Oh, for God's sake," said Scott. "It isn't us: Look here, there's something very wrong in the Estuary—trouble. We've got to get to the admiral as fast as is humanly possible. And *you've* got to help us. I know that isn't polite, seeing you've plucked us off the buoy already, but it's got to be done somehow. It's vital, man!"

"Aaah," said Steve, pulling at his underlip. "So you wasn't just yachting."

"No," said Scott slowly. "We were not *just* yachting."

Ann spoke for the first time. "Please," she said. "Please, you must help us."

"Lady, it's God's truth we can't do anything. *Not* a thing. If you'd got my brother's *Unity* now, she's got a engine. He'd have took you straight in, fifty pounds or no fifty pounds. I can see you've had a doin' all right. Family man myself." He beamed at her.

Nothing could make them realise the terrible urgency of their plight—except the truth. Scott was reluctant to tell them that. He had to get to the admiral first.

Tom's voice sounded at the hatch above them. "Cup o' tea?" he called down, and thrust a pot and two mugs through the opening. Steve took them. "Wrap yourselves round that an' you'll feel better. There's eggs and things comin'."

"You're damned good," said Scott gratefully as Steve poured out the thick black stuff. "We'd probably have gone under with the cold on that thing if you hadn't come along." He lifted the cup wearily—it was almost too heavy for him.

When she had drunk, Ann said, "Steve—I can call you Steve, can't I?" Steve grinned. "You've got to think up some way of getting us to Chatham in a hurry."

"I'm tryin', miss," he said.

"Well?"

"Course there's the lightship."

"Would that help."

"She's got wireless; she could call somethin' out to take you off."

"We couldn't make her with this tide," said Scott flatly.

"Tide isn' far off the turn. We was thinkin' about a place to anchor when we heard you. That's what Tom was arguin' about. Tide'll serve inside half an hour."

"Then will you——?"

"Must have wind, miss. If we get wind we'll take you up. Can't say fairer than that."

"Bless you," said Ann.

They sipped on at the hot tea. It was enormously strong, bitter despite the heavy load of sugar. It seemed to do them the world and all of good. Ann was having long intervals in which she did not shiver.

Tom came aft again. This time he had two plates piled with bacon and eggs and huge slabs of bread and butter. "Rough like," he said through the hatch. "But I reckon you don't want gold plate this time o' day."

Ann realised suddenly how enormously hungry she was. Before she had been only half-conscious of the pain that knotted her stomach. Now she wolfed greedily at the hot, rich mess.

Tom and Steve watched them with a frank, kindly curiosity.

They were near finished when Tom said casually, "Wind's haulin' round."

"Where?" demanded Scott.

"West o' north a bit," said Tom slowly. "Probably settle there. Blow when the tide turns."

"The lightship lies west of north of us, doesn't she?" asked Scott painfully.

"Sure—that's ri'——" began Tom cheerfully.

But Steve said, "I promised to put 'em on th' Barrow Deep if so we had wind, but if it's goin' to blow from there——"

"Bes' thing would be to run back for the Mid Barrow when the tide turns. Ebb'll take us up nicely, and if we have a bit o' wind behind of us——"

"That'll be bes'," said Steve, nodding definitely.

Ann finished off her eggs and leaned back against the edge of one of the built-in bunks, three parts asleep. Steve realised her state slowly. "Wants to go to sleep, she does," he said kindly. "On deck, Tom. You put 'er in the berth, mister."

an' if you give Tom 'er clothes and yours, he'll take 'em for'ard and get them prop'ly dry over the galley stove."

Three minutes later Ann was inside the skipper's blankets. Scott thrust his head out through the hatch with the clothes. "You'll call me if the wind changes—or there's a chance of putting us on board something else?"

"Course we'll call you. You get to sleep now."

Scott was asleep almost before he reached the mate's berth.

When he woke again they were under way. He could tell that by the increased noise of the sea along the side planking, though the great beamed barge was as steady and level as a table. There was a clock in the bulkhead beside the long mirror on the door of the locker. It was half-past two. The tide had turned nearly four hours ago. For a long minute he lay wondering why he was awake. As he moved he found that he was stiff all over, his hands felt calloused and nerveless, the finger joints unwilling to respond. Something had woken him, he wondered what.

A voice came through the hatch again. "Mister, you awake?"

Painfully he clambered out of the bunk as he answered. Ann in her berth stirred restlessly. He climbed the companion ladder and thrust his head on deck. There was still a patchy fog, but it was very bright now, a thin layer on the water, no more. Tom was staring down the hatch, he said:

"There's nothing been near us to hail, but there's a motor boat of some kind coming close now. Shall we give her a shout?"

Scott listened to the distant noise of the engine with a sudden queer access of terror. Would it be that terrible engine that had chased them all the night?

The note was different, a higher, flatter note. He breathed suddenly. "Where are we?"

"Driftin' about. The wind's all over the place. Reckon the Mid Barrow's a mile and a ha'f away."

"And the fog?"

"Go with a woosh in a bit now. Can't make out why it's hung past midday."

"Shall we hail?" said Steve from the wheel.

Scott nodded quickly. "Yes," he said. "It's the best thing. I can't ask you to keep on for me indefinitely."

"It's all right about us," said Steve promptly. "We don't mind. We've talked it over, and if it wasn't for taking all night to get there, we'd willing take you in to Chatham. We don't want to know what it's all about, but if you like you can tell us when it's all over."

"Me too," said Tom inconsequently, and made a trumpet of his hands. "Hoooooy."

From the motor boat came an answering hail.

"Hoooooy," said Tom again. "Come alongside."

Scott dropped back into the cabin. At some time Tom had brought their clothes back dried from the galley stove. He slipped into trousers and a shirt and sweater, and woke Ann. He had to shake her for a minute or so before she was properly roused. "Get up," he said. "Motor boat coming alongside."

"The——"

"No, something new. Here are your clothes."

He went up on deck.

Out of the thin fog a white-painted, bridge-decked motor cruiser was gliding up, her engines just turning over, two men on her forecastle.

She came alongside, took the line Tom threw to her, and was still.

"What's the trouble?" said one of the men on the forecastle.

Without preamble Scott said, "My name's O'Hara. It's a matter of the most desperate urgency that I should get to the Commander-in-Chief at Chatham before this evening. Can you possibly take me in?"

The two young men looked at each other, slightly startled.

From the open windows of the wheel-house the man who had been steering thrust his head out. "Chatham?" he said. "We're trying to pick our way through this fluff to Dover."

"I'm sorry," said Scott. "I can't tell you the whole story yet, but we were forced on to the Little Sunk last night, and the skipper here picked us off the Barrow Number Two buoy this morning. There's very serious trouble in the Estuary." He saw faint doubt in the three young faces before him. "And quite frankly, I ought to tell you that there may be a certain amount of danger involved in getting me to Chatham, so of course . . ."

He waited for the trump card to take the trick.

"Just where do you want to get to?" said the man in the wheel-house.

"The Commander-in-Chief at the Nore. If you can land me at the dockyard steps . . ."

"We'll be a day late at Dover," said the man in the wheel-house, "but I don't suppose it matters. My name's Carter. I suppose we can get a drink in Chatham to-night, boys?"

"Thank God," said Scott half to himself. "I've got a girl with me, by the way. We'll come aboard as soon as I can get our gear."

Ann came up out of the cuddy. She was carrying the life-

belts and her oilskins. She turned to Tom. "I'm not going to try to thank you now," she said, "but I've written my address and Scott's on a paper on the table, and you're going

to let us know as soon as you get back to London." She held out her hand. "Good-bye till then." Suddenly she stretched forward and kissed Tom. The little man blushed and Steve, from the wheel, said:

"Oh, my."

She stepped up to him quickly and kissed him too.

"I'll tell Mrs. Steve," said Tom delightedly.

On the little note of comedy they stepped on to the motor cruiser.

Steve shouted from the wheel, "Your course is sou'-west by west half-west till you get to the Knob buoy—but the fog'll be gone long before you make it. Good luck."

The two young men on the forecastle both offered Ann unnecessary help. They grinned at Scott and let him climb aboard by himself. When he was on they cast off, the twin engines started with a rush and the white boat drew clear of the Sunrise of Mistley. Tom waved his pipe at them as they drew away.

As the engines settled into their stride Scott smiled at Carter. "What can she do?" he asked.

"Eight all out," said Carter. "We're not fast, but we get there. Ought to be in by six o'clock with a bit of luck. Now, what's all this about?"

"Let me introduce you first. Miss Ann Coppard—Mr. Carter."

Carter grinned an acknowledgment from the wheel. "The long one's Philip, and the short one's Septimus," he said. "Your name's O'Hara. Now we know each other. You don't look too good, either of you. Want anything to eat?"

"Tom gave us a meal when they picked us up—but that was four or five hours ago."

"Sep—grub," said Carter shortly. "Now, what've you been up to? Did they really pick you off a buoy?"

"Barrow Number Two," said Scott quietly. "We'd been there since just before dawn. We'd been swimming before that since twenty minutes or so the other side of high tide. Hence the lifebelts."

"What was your ship?"

"Shannon, of Leigh. Chartered."

"Insured?"

Scott nodded.

"That's all right."

"How did you get on the sand?"

"Ran on," said Scott bluntly.

"Sorry," said Carter. "But you know this is all devilish intriguing. 'Tisn't every day that one picks up somebody who says he's been sitting on a fairway buoy since dawn and wants to see an admiral. Oh! Wa-a-ait a minute. I've got

it. You aren't the fellow who was cut down at anchor a couple of nights ago?"

"Scott O'Hara?" said Philip softly. "Somewhere off the Red Sand. That was a bird named Hemingway."

"Me, none the less," said Scott slowly.

"And now you've lost another one," said Carter, looking at him keenly. "Underwriters will be liking you. Not?"

Scott grunted. "Who cares about underwriters. Look here, there's no particular reason why you should trust me, but I'm going to ask you to do so. You can see that there's something fairly big in the wind—one doesn't get involved in two wrecks in the Estuary within a week for nothing. If you don't ask me anything more, I'll promise you front seats at the show if and when the balloon goes up."

"That makes me more curious than ever," said Carter sadly. "Am I allowed to ask you if you'd like to grab a bit of sleep?"

Ann smiled gratefully at him. "Scott woke me just as you were coming alongside, but I could sleep for a week."

"Eat first," said Carter, waving a hand behind him. "Sep, how are the vittles? You go through the door. Don't bump your heads."

"What did you mean 'by danger involved?'" said Carter as Scott prepared to pass through the door.

"God knows," said Scott. "I don't. Anything may happen, though I don't think the hunt will be up in the daytime. Keep away from the Oaze Deep."

"You do satisfy a fellow, don't you? Go and eat."

Scott woke again in the late afternoon. Septimus was calling him. "We're just making Sheerness," he said. "The skipper thought you ought to know."

Scott followed him through into the snug wheel-house.

"Where's your danger?" said Carter amiably. "We're there or thereabouts. Would it suit you to land here and drive up to your admiral?"

"Wouldn't save any time to speak of," said Scott. "We'll stick to the north steps."

"Fog cleared just after three," said Carter. "But it's hardly what you'd call a bright afternoon. There was about as much danger showing as you get in a ping-pong tournament. I suppose this isn't all a big newspaper stunt?"

Scott said suddenly. "Captain Ames, who was with us in the last business, was killed, last night."

"Drowned?" said Carter.

"No—shot," said Ames grimly. "This isn't a stunt."

He looked out of the wheel-house windows. In the Little Nore two battleships of the *Barham* class were lying. They had awnings up. Boats swung at their booms. They looked curiously peaceful.

"Is it this—German business?" said Carter slowly.

Scott wheeled on him. "What do you know about it?" he demanded.

"Only what's been in the papers," said Carter. "Increasing tension. State of alarm. All that sort of thing."

"I've seen nothing, and heard nothing for twenty-four hours. Is there anything new?"

"We're as near war, I gather, as we've been for some time—but then, we are about once every three months nowadays."

Scott relaxed. "Something of the sort," he said. "About an hour to go?"

"About that; the ebb's against us."

In the Blackstakes there were two cruisers, Saltpan Reach was empty, up in the creeks were reserve auxiliaries, the Medway marshes stretched out grey and shombre in the sullen afternoon. The Medway itself ran brown and dirty. A paddle steamer passed them, and then two small cabin cruisers, going down with the flood. Two heron flew slowly across their course with great wings flapping. Wild duck flighted.

The marshes turned silver as they pressed up. The light decreased. They seemed to be running a race with the fading day. Tension grew on the little ship. Scott was not certain of his reception. He began to tidy himself vaguely. Ever since they had been taken off the buoy he had been in a half-daze. He was not quite certain what he had said, what he had told the men on the barge, he found that he could not quite remember how he had persuaded Carter to bring them in. He brushed the vagueness aside, he must concentrate on one thing—seeing the admiral, telling him of the danger that threatened them—that threatened England. The immensity of the secret which he held almost overwhelmed him for a moment. Desperately he struggled to master the numbness of his brain, to marshal his facts, to pull out his hidden reserves of mental energy and get his story through.

They passed Darnett fort and straightened up for Hoo. The dark bulk of the old batteries, squatting like toads on the islands of the saltings, seemed to frown at him. The heights beyond—the hills of Gillingham and Chatham seemed to scowl. He was letting his nerves run away with him, letting imagination overpower him, there was no reason to believe that his reception would be hostile, his story disbelieved. The need for haste seized him again. Would they never get there? They rounded Hoo fort. Suddenly they could see the dockyard, see masts and the great jibs of cranes, and smoke and flags flying.

The engines appeared to take on a deeper note, a more urgent beat. The darkness lifted a little. The tide seemed to fight less strongly. They were moving through utterly still water now, spear point to a long shaft of yellow-white foam,

barbed with their bow waves, heading straight for the dockyard steps. There was an illusion of enormous speed about their progress, Scott felt himself caught up in it, felt himself part of a purpose that was hurtling towards fulfilment, driving to success.

They raced across the last broad stretch of the river. Destroyers were lying in threes at the buoys above the entrance. Grey masts and funnels showed over the dockyard wall.

Carter stretched out and switched off the engine. The boat slid in silently towards the steps. A dockyard policeman strolled out to meet them. Carter reversed the engines and checked her speed. The boat came to a standstill neatly at the steps.

Scott jumped ashore.

CHAPTER XIX

THE dockyard policeman was a little puzzled, he began, "Excuse me, sir——"

Scott cut across him authoritatively. "I've got to get to the C.-in-C. at once, have you got a telephone?"

The policeman looked doubtful, but the air of authority demolished the doubts. "This way, sir," he said, and led Scott to the little lock house between the great entrance locks.

There were two other men there in uniform. Scott's guide said, "Gentleman want's to telephone the admiral. Who was you wanting, sir?"

"Better get me his secretary first—if he's still at the office."

"'E'll be gorn," said a voice, but the policeman went stolidly through the ritual of telephoning the office.

A clerk answered. "Gentleman wants to speak to the secretary," said the policeman monotonously, while Scott chafed with impatience.

"Secretary's gorn home," said the policeman. "Yes? Oh, yes? . . . But 'e'll be back in half an hour."

"Workin' overtime," said the voice from the corner.

"Let me speak to him," said Scott impatiently, and stretching forward took the receiver.

"Hallo . . . Yes. I must see the admiral, at once. . . . No, not the Admiral of the Yard, the Commander-in-Chief. . . . He's not in the office? Is there anybody senior in the office? . . . They're all coming back later? That's no use. . . . Where is Sir Francis? . . . Then have me put through on the private wire. . . . What? . . . Good God, man, do as you're told." The last was rank bluff, the clerk was wavering. Scott thought a little hectoring might turn the trick. It did. A manservant

of some sort answered. "Will you put me through to the admiral?" said Scott instantly. As the man seemed to hesitate, he added, "It's urgent." There seemed to be a state of nerves both at the office and in the house. Scott thought that straightforward forcefulness would probably serve his ends best. Another voice came on to the line.

"Who's that?" There was no mistaking the crisp curtness of the tone.

"My name is O'Hara, Sir Francis. I have urgent information for you. May I come straight up to Admiralty House?"

"What about?"

"It's not information that should be given over the telephone, Sir Francis. I'm speaking from a dockyard office."

"Where?"

"The North Steps. I've just come in from sea."

"Come up." The receiver at the other end was put down with a decisive movement.

Scott turned to the policeman. "Where can I get a car?"

"Nothing here," said the policeman stolidly. "You could 'phone for one from the town."

"Good God," said Scott explosively, "I've not got all night."

The voice from the corner said, "There's officers' cars 'longside *Fleetwood*."

Scott fixed his policeman again. "Take me to the *Fleetwood* please."

The policeman led him out wordlessly.

They stumbled across the lock gates. Ann and Carter were still standing at the top of the steps. "Better come with us," he shouted.

They followed over the rough surface of the lockside. In a minute or two they had reached the basin. The *Fleetwood* was moored close to the corner of the basin, they had reached the quarter-deck gangway in another minute. Scott ran up it, and remembered, just in time, to take off his hat as he stepped on to the quarter-deck. He was still wearing his oilskin coat and his trousers were stained and wrinkled. The hat was aggressively new by comparison—Carter had lent it to him.

The sentry at the gangway looked more than dubious.

The sub-lieutenant on duty was just behind the sentry, however, Scott appealed to Cæsar. "I'm extraordinarily sorry to bother you," he said quickly. "But I've got to get up to Sir Francis Brook as quickly as possible. Could I be driven up in one of those cars?"

"Sir Francis . . ."

"It's desperately urgent," said Scott.

Something in his tone seemed to catch the other, he said, "I'm on duty, but . . ."

A second officer, standing in the shadow of a turret said, "I'll run you up."

Scott counted the gold rings and changed his tone again. "Terribly sorry to use like a taxi rank, sir. My name's O'Hara."

"Mine's Grant. How many of you are there?" He looked apprehensively at the quay.

"Myself and the lady, sir. I'd be terribly glad if you could—er—keep the other man in play. His name is Carter, he's just brought us in from the Barrow Deep in a motor cruiser. The C.-in-C. might want him, later."

"Trouble?" said Grant, lifting an eyebrow.

"Big trouble," said Scott soberly. "Can we——?"

"I'll send Mr. Carter up," said Grant to the sub-lieutenant. "Fill him up with pink gin or something."

"Yes, sir."

Grant looked at the docks policeman. "Do you want him?"

"No, brought him along to prove my bonafides, that's all, Thanks."

They went down the gangway. At the bottom Scott said, "Ann, this is Commander Grant—Miss Coppard. Mr. Carter."

"Mr. Carter, if you'll go on board they'll be very glad to give you a drink."

Carter grinned happily. "I'm not being left out of the picnic?" he said.

"I won't forget you," said Scott. "See you later."

The next moment they were in Grant's car sweeping along the edge of the basin past ranked destroyers, another cruiser and a nest of submarines.

Grant said, as he drove, "You look—if you don't mind my saying so—as if you'd had a spot of bother."

"We were hunted on to the Little Sunk last night, a friend of ours was shot, and we were left to drown. A barge picked us up off the Barrow Number Two buoy this morning, and Carter brought us in."

Grant whistled. "Why?" he demanded.

"Because we'd found out something we ought not to have," said Scott pithily.

They turned up between the first and second basins, and on to the road through the barracks. Grant drove on in silence.

At the gates he stopped, returned the salute of the sentry, and drove on again. As they swung round the corner outside, he said, "Is there going to be anything doing?"

"That depends on the admiral," said Scott seriously. "I should think it more than likely."

"I think I'll—wait about," said Grant reflectively.

"I'll remember that," said Scott.

Grant was not observing any speed limit particularly closely. They were turning in at the great gates of Admiralty House almost before Scott realised clearly that they were free of the dockyard.

They were shown straight to the admiral's office, Grant remained behind. The admiral was seated in a chair by the window, he was in golfing kit, looking singularly unprofessional. In the second or two as they crossed the room, Scott registered the keen eyes, the thin, hawk-like face, and the rat-trap mouth. He had seen Brook before, on official occasions, mostly in uniform, always he had had a full mede of respect for him.

Brook stood up when he saw Ann. "Well?" he barked.

"I am O'Hara—this is Miss Coppard."

"How d'do. What is it?"

"I have reason to believe that a controlled minefield has been or is being laid in the Thames Estuary, from the Outer Bar buoy to the West Oaze buoy—possibly farther."

"Have you, by God! Who are you?"

"Commander Hover, at the Admiralty, will check my bonafides, sir." Urgently Scott hoped that Weeks had done his part.

"Ritchie, get Hover on the telephone—know him? Right. Check this." Brook spoke over his shoulder to a man who was half-concealed by a high desk at the end of the room. He turned to Scott again. "Not that I disbelieve you," he said fleetingly human. For a long minute he stared at Scott, his brows close together. Ann he disregarded. Suddenly he snapped, "Go on. When did you discover this?"

Scott had been prepared to tell his story vividly, in good round phrases. Under this man's eye that was impossible, he jerked himself suddenly into the part of a witness under fierce cross-examination.

"On the afternoon of Tuesday the second, I dredged up a length of new cable with my anchor between the West Oaze buoy and the tail of the sand."

"Take that down," snapped the Admiral, and somebody at the back of the room began to write. "Go on."

"We hauled on the cable until we found an end, and on the end was a metal cylinder which I believe to have been a German pattern hydrophone, or something similar."

"Yes?"

"There was one boat in sight when we were foul of the cable, a white motor cruiser. I anchored for the night in the lee of the Red Sand." Scott saw the admiral's brow furrow. Instantly he knew what was coming, but he went on doggedly. "Approximately at midnight we were deliberately run down at

anchor by the motor cruiser which we had previously seen. . . ."

"The name of the owner of the yacht which was run down was Hemingway," said the Admiral curtly.

"I am a member of the staff of the *Clarion*," Scott was defiant. "I dictated that story, and I stipulated that my correct name was not to be used. We kept the ship afloat and took her in to Gravesend where we slipped her. The same afternoon we chartered the ketch *Shannon* at Leigh on Sea and went back to the Oaze Deep."

"Why wasn't your name used?"

"Because," said Scott wearily, "I wanted the people who ran us down to think that I thought it was a drunken accident. May I sit down, sir?"

Brooks became human again. "Of course. I'm sorry. Yes?"

"We went back to the Oaze Deep, closing with the area about ten o'clock. Approximately at midnight . . ."

Steadily he went on, detailing the whole of that first night's adventure. Brooks made curt comments now and then, checking bearings, questioning times, tides, the force of the wind. It was plain that he was bringing a fine, keen brain to the task. It became plainer, after a while, that he was accepting Scott's story, was keenly absorbed in the material that he displayed, enormously interested in the details.

On and on. Steadily the story worked to its conclusion. Once there was an interruption. A butler came in.

"Lady Francis asks——"

"Tell Lady Francis that I will not be going out to dinner. Ask her to make my apologies." Brook was human again. "You must be hungry. . . . Perrin, bring in a tray of—of sandwiches, whisky and soda. Miss Coppard, what will you drink? I'll leave it to you, Parrin. Go on."

Scott went on. He told of the cable ship, and the vigil in the Black Deep, the chase and the stranding. The ordeal on the sand. There were no flowing periods, no roundnesses. He stuck starkly to facts, an unemotional recital, unadorned, unpolished.

The sandwiches came while he still talked, and he ate, talking. The admiral ate with them. The secretary who had come back, ate too. Briefly he had said, "Hover confirms." Otherwise he listened in silence.

At the end Scott said, "And so we drove Carter into bringing us straight to the North Steps. He's gone a good deal out of his way; I hope that'll be remembered, sir."

"What do you expect me to do?" demanded Brook unexpectedly.

Scott smiled, a tired smile. "That isn't for me to say, sir, but you can't risk much if you carry out a sweep with grapnels

on a line of bearing north fifteen east of the Outer Bar buoy—and another inside the West Qaze. . . .”

Brook smiled for the first time. “You don’t ask much,” he said.

He sat back in his deep chair. His face had disappeared into the shadow. Scott, from where he sat, could see nothing. The seconds went by in absolute silence. Scott was past caring now. Virtue had gone out of him. His message was delivered and the rest was with God and the admiral. Somehow he scarcely cared how things went. He sipped his whisky and was still.

Brook was still too.

The silence went on, enormous, brewing, pregnant with immense possibilities. Brook made no move. Scott realised suddenly that Ann was asleep. The secretary uncrossed his legs and the movement was like the end of an epoch. The silence formed again immediately, however. Still Brook made no move.

Then suddenly he spoke. “Who’s duty destroyer?” he snapped.

“*Heron*,” said the secretary. “Four hours notice for steam.”

“Twenty to eight . . .” said Brook reflectively.

“*Diarmid* was due in half an hour ago, sir. She was delayed by fog.”

“She’ll still have steam . . .”

“There will be two drifters in attendance on the battleships at the Nore, sir.”

“I’d thought of them,” said Brook. “Let me see . . . the M.T.B.’s . . .”

“Three of them should be ready for sea, sir; barring ammunition.”

“Right! Right! Right!” Brook rose suddenly from his chair. “Now we’ll get to work.” Over his shoulder he suddenly flung, “I accept your story. Now, Ritchie. Make a signal to *Diarmid*. ‘Light all boilers. Steam for full speed utmost dispatch. Launch to await me at North Steps.’ That’ll do for *Diarmid*. Next. Stop all leave . . . no need to recall anybody yet. . . . Let me see, crews for the M.T.B.’s, I suppose their people will be ashore.”

“Some of them will be bound to be at the club and the canteens, sir. We could complete from volunteers.”

“Commander Grant of *Fleetwood* is, I believe, waiting outside, sir,” said Scott, risking the interjection.

“And beareth the trumpet afar,” said Brook, rubbing his hands. “He’d better go in command of the M.T.B.’s, Ritchie. I’ll leave the manning to you. They must complete with fuel and ammunition and lock out within the hour.

That'll mean work. *Heron* to have steam for half-speed within two hours. The drifters to rendezvous 22.00 hours Outer Bar buoy. And now, London." Suddenly he turned again on Scott. "How would you explain all this to the First Lord?" he demanded.

"Present him with a *fait accompli*," said Scott, with a faint flippancy.

"You would, would you? Well, that's what I am going to do. Ritchie. 'First Lord. Proceeding sea investigate circumstantial story establishment enemy minefield Thames Estuary. Give him details of what I'm taking and tell him I've stopped all leave. Always impresses the civilians. Submit advisable cancel all sailings until further notice. Acquaint commanders-in-chief Home Fleet, Portsmouth, Plymouth.' Send that to the First Sea Lord as well."

"I could get him on the 'phone, sir."

"He'd only tell me not to go," said Brook sourly. "Don't send any of that till I've left the house. Code it. And code the message to the drifters too." He raised his voice. "Ring for Perrin, will you?"

The stenographer who had been taking down the conversation pressed a bell. "Get a transcript of this information up to the First Sea Lord by road immediately." Perrin came in. "Overcoat and sea-boots, Perrin, and I won't be back to-night." He turned to the Secretary again. "Get me Percy Blakeney on the telephone."

"He's at Canterbury until ten o'clock, sir."

"Get him yourself, then. Tell him to try to make *Heron* before she leaves. If not to come on in anything he can pick up. Damme, this is a job for the Admiral of the Yard as much as any one. Right. We'll stop at the club and pick up what we can. Start with the *Diarmid*, Ritchie."

"Sir, can I?"

"You can *not*. No glory for you this trip, Ritchie. You've got to stay and hold the fort, there'll be work for you to do before morning if half of what Mr. O'Hara says it true. . . ." He turned on Scott, suddenly quaintly ferocious. "And by God it had better be!"

Scott straightened his cramped legs and climbed out of his chair.

Brook turned on Ann who was also struggling to rise. "I'm afraid Lady Brook has had to go out to dinner," he said. "But Perrin will show you to your room."

"I'm coming with you," said Ann bluntly.

Brook threw back his head and roared with laughter.

"Well, I'm probably going to be dismissed the service over to-night's work, anyway. I suppose you'll have to. Nelson

took ladies to sea, anyway, if half the stories they tell are true. Perrin—is the car ready ? ”

“ I took the liberty to order it, sir.”

Brooks took his heavy uniform overcoat, and dropped it over his arm. “ Unleash the dogs of war,” he said, with a wry smile.

On their way through the hall, he said, “ Commander Grant, was it ? ”

“ Yes, sir.” Behind him Scott could hear Ritchie beginning on the telephone.

“ He was with me in *Malaya*—h’mmm, ten years ago now. Perrin, is Commander Grant—— ? ”

“ I put him in the library, sir.”

“ Well, bring him out again.”

There was a moment’s conversation on the steps, then they were in the admiral’s big Daimler. Scott had faint visions of street lamps, the dockyard gates, a sentry presenting arms.

Then they were drawn up outside the Naval Club. They dropped Grant there. “ Ritchie will have started the ball rolling,” said Brook equably. “ Pick up your crews and gear and get under way. You have the rendezvous ? ”

“ Yes, sir.”

“ Go to it.”

Grant saluted and disappeared.

“ North Steps,” said Brook curtly.

The great car moved slowly forward. And even as it moved contagion seemed to take the dockyard. Men were running on the roadway, lights came on. Masthead lamps were flashing . . . the night was suddenly alive, electric, vibrating.

CHAPTER XX

THERE was a little knot of men waiting at the North Step, and a car or two on the near side of the locks.

The Admiral grunted. Scott took the grunt for satisfaction. “ Ah, Cameron,” he said. “ Where have you materialised from ? ”

“ Ritchie telephoned me at the club, sir. He told me I’d better report *here*. I’ve got four volunteers here, sir.”

“ They’d better go back to the motor boats——”

“ The motor boats were double manned within thirty seconds from the club alone, sir.”

“ H’mm.”

“ You’ll be wanting extra officers for the drifters, sir.”

"All right, bring 'em along. Miss Coppard, this is my flag lieutenant. O'Hara. . . . Are the *Diarmid's* people here yet?"

A figure stepped forward out of the knot of officers, and saluted. "Here, sir."

The headlights of cars woke the dark of the basins behind them, they could hear the grinding of a heavy lorry, men appeared suddenly at the lock gates, lights were flashing on.

Sir Francis stumped down the steps to the motor launch.

Pipes shrilled on board the destroyer. Men were hurrying—little scents of steam and hot oil filled the air. The deck plating vibrated faintly.

Scott and Ann were handed over into the charge of a sub-lieutenant, and taken forward to the captain's sea cabin. As they went they heard somebody say, "Steam for fifteen knots now, sir. All boilers lit." And Brook's voice said, "Good."

As they went forward men were casting the covers off the quick-firers and carrying up ammunition boxes. Men were busy at the torpedo tubes, taking off practice heads. Men were busy at the searchlights. Men were putting on deadlights, covering up openings, running to and fro. Whistles shrilled.

They went up ladders, and more ladders. Finally they were shown out of bustle and turmoil into the quite of a comfortable cabin. The sub grinned boyishly at them. "Can you tell me what in God's name all this is about? Is war declared?"

"Wait and see," said Scott impishly.

The boy looked hurt. Scott relented. "It's a cleaning-up expedition," he said. "Dirty work in the Estuary."

"If we'd come in to time," said the boy joyfully. "I'd have been ashore an hour ago. And I never thought to say, 'Thank God' for fog."

Out of the night they heard a motor boat approach, and the roar of a third. The whole river seemed alive now. Lines of shore lights were being switched on. Masthead lights were talking hurriedly, ship to ship.

Sir Francis came in to them after a brief delay, the flag lieutenant behind him. "Don't move," he said cheerfully. "We'll be off in a minute. Cameron, I think we'd better tell *Astrius* and *Amaranth* to raise steam for fourteen knots, and the battleships to stand by. Ritchie will have stopped leave at Sheerness, but you'd better check that. What happened to the people who brought you in, O'Hara."

"They were taking care of Carter on *Fleetwood*, sir. That was the boat lying just ahead of the North Steps, sir. There were two seamen on board her, sir, so I expect *Fleetwood* had sent for his crew."

"Cameron, tell *Fleetwood* to hold them. . . . I don't want a crop of rumours spreading round the town."

Scott grinned. "I think Carter will try to get out with whoever comes from *Fleetwood*, sir. He's a determined young man."

"That's all right, as long as he doesn't open his mouth in the pubs. Right, Cameron, that's all. Any signals to be brought straight to me here. Call us at Saltpan Reach."

Pipes shrilled, and Scott heard feet running on the forecastle. A moment later the little ship began to vibrate. Out of the scuttle Scott saw the dockyard lights swing by them and disappear as the destroyer turned. A seaman came in a moment later and screwed home the deadlights. The admiral watched him go, said slowly, "Well, we'll be up all night." Yawned, said, "Sorry, Miss Coppard." And was, on the word, asleep.

Scott winked at Ann and settled back in his own chair.

Ship noises went on all around them, feet on iron ladders, a voice harsh and metallic from a loud-speaker phone somewhere, the heavy, increasing vibration of the engines, the higher thin whirr of dynamos. Scott dozed through it. He was still desperately weary. The chill had gone out of them both in the afternoon, the stiffness was working out, and the feeling of utter exhaustion, mental and physical, was wearing off, but they were still tired. And through the ship noises, as he slept, Scott could hear the rattle of the sub-machine gun, and Ames's great voice bellowing to the hunt to come on.

Ann in her sleep put out her hand once and clutched at him. He half-woke and closed his own hand round hers. She shuddered sometimes as she slept. She too, was remembering Ames.

They had scarcely started, it seemed, before Cameron was back again. "Saltpan Reach, sir."

The admiral was completely awake on the word. He had a cultivated knack for stealing snatches of sleep. "News?"

"First Sea Lord, sir. 'Proceed as requisite, full authority. Keep me informed.'"

"I misjudged him," said Brook cheerfully. "Next."

"The cruisers want permission to get under way, sir."

"No. They're my strategic reserve. I don't want any big ships moving, and putting the wind up the whole Estuary, Next?"

"The M.T.B.'s are locking out, sir."

"How many?"

"Four."

"Four? That man Grant's good."

"*Heron*'s left the buoy, sir. She's got steam for eight knots, and is working up fast."

"And that's good work, too. If we get nothing else out of this it'll be a useful night exercise."

"Have the drifters left yet?"

"Just about to leave, sir."

"They're to come alongside in the steam. I want to put a senior officer on board each of them. What have you got in that bunch you brought aboard?"

"Lt.-Commander Burke, and Lieutenant Rentoul are the seniors, sir."

"Burke to *Unity*, Rentoul to *Stormcock*. Bring 'em here, get Commander Norton too, and I want the large scale chart of the Estuary. Tell 'em on the bridge about the drifters."

Rentoul and Burke were in the room within the minute. Sir Francis looked at them, and grinned. "Thirsting for glory," he said. "You've got a command, each of you. Ah, here's Norton. And the chart. Put it here. I want to go over the orders."

He bent over the chart for a moment or two, tapping his teeth with a pencil. "Burke—you first. *Unity* will carry out a sweep with grapnels from Number Two buoy—here. Clear of the bar buoy along the line of the channel and return—so. Report the moment you bring anything to the surface."

He bent over the chart again. "Rentoul. *Stormcock* will sweep from the West Oaze buoy in to two fathoms south of the sand. So. If you find nothing, sweep across the Oaze Deep to the Red Sand buoy."

He straightened himself suddenly and fixed Scott with his deep eyes. "Do you want to add anything to that?"

"The cable we picked up ran as near as we could judge south-south-east from a line between the buoy and the sand, sir," said Scott.

"Right. Now the M.T.B.'s. Have you got their numbers, Cameron?"

"Four, six, seven and ten, sir."

"Four to proceed at twenty knots until abeam of the Mouse, then at thirty to Sunk Head, by way of the Swin and the Middle Deep. I want her to contain the end of the Black Deep. Six, seven and ten will sweep up the Black Deep at fifteen knots, rising to twenty at discretion, and clean up anything that they may find."

"*Heron* will proceed at normal cruising speed by the Mouse, and Barrow Deep, showing normal lights, darken ship off the Sunk Light, and proceed at full speed to position N. 51. 52. E. 2. 6. She will search for cable ship believed to be operating in those waters. She is to be brought in for examination to the Nore. *Heron* will also lend support to the M.T.B.'s as and when necessary. Is that clear enough?"

Cameron said, "I think so, sir." /

Diarmid's captain said, faintly plaintive, "What do we do, sir?"

"We're flagship," said Brook cheerfully. "Muck about as requisite. I want to see the beginning of the sweep first.

They could feel the motion slowing suddenly. The vibration below them had almost ceased. A signalman appeared at the door with a pad, which he thrust under Cameron's nose.

"*Unity* asking for permission to come alongside, sir."

"Good luck, Burke," said Brook quietly. "You'd better be getting along too, Rentoul. You understand the orders? Good. Luck to you too."

Brook sat staring at the chart, his pencil tapping against his teeth. There was a faint bump against the side of the ship, and the groan of fenders, feet running on the deck again, and the soft burr of steam from a valve.

Then the noises ceased, and the destroyer went ahead again. Sheerness lights drifted by on the starboard hand. Scott, standing in the alleyway, saw the dark shape of one of the drifters glide past them. The doorway on the other side was shut, he could not see the lights of the battleships in the fairway.

They stood out into the darkness and the winking buoys of the channel slid up to them over a still sea.

Cameron came up to them again in a little while. "Number Four Buoy, sir," he said.

"I'll come up," said the Admiral. "O'Hara, you'd better come with me. Miss Coppard, we'll call you as soon as there's anything to see."

Ann smiled gratefully, she was suddenly tired again.

Scott shivered as they moved out into the cool night air. He followed the Admiral up the vertical ladder to the crowded little bridge. Norton was leaning over the chart-table, faintly illuminated in the thin glow that rose from the surface of the chart. The light came aft and faintly illuminated the sub, who stood by the compass. The first lieutenant was leaning against the weather dodger with night glasses to his eyes. Beside the Henderson's gear were two signalmen and two unidentifiable figures. The night air drifted harshly across the little flat top. They seem poised enormously high, suspended over the water. The sensation was not unlike night flying. They were divorced from the rest of the ship, from the guns' crews who lounged behind the guns far below them. From the quartermaster in the wheel-house and the men at the search lights below. From the busy work-parties still stowing gear and making ready on the main deck.

Astern of them the two drifters followed, keeping strict line ahead. Their funnel smoke made dark stains across the glow of the Sheerness lights, and the high-climbing chains of fire of

the Chatham ridge. Still further astern were the clustered lights of the battleships, with a homing paddle-steamer fleeting like a brilliant ghost in front of them.

Scott looked ahead again. The Estuary was soft and quiet. The ordered lights flared to each other all across the night. Out in the main fairway shipping moved up and down upon its lawful occasions; beyond the drifting red and green of the navigation lights the Southend glow hung like an aurora in the sky. It seemed incredible that there could be an enemy in all the peacefulness that there could be a hidden danger, a sudden terror in the dark. The horror of last night on the sands, of the bitter pursuit, the shooting, the relentless climb of the tide were as far away as last night's wind, as last night's fog. It was unbelievable that that memory had set in operation this little fleet, had set the dockyard afire, the cables, the telephones, the very air humming with excitement. . . .

A light began to wink, quickly, nervously on board the first of the drifters.

"*Unity* beginning the sweep, sir," said Norton.

"Slow to four knots," said Brook.

There was a brief moment of ordered bustle. The wind on the bridge died suddenly; expiring like the end of a summer squall. The second drifter sheered out of line and began to slip past them. She went by, a dark, silent shape, and slid into the blackness ahead.

The sweep proceeded slowly. Nothing happened.

Scott began to fidget with his hands. So much depended on these first attempts. Would they find anything—was there anything to find? Was it all some astonishing mistake?

The sub beside him said softly, "Here comes *Heron*, whacking up like hell. Billy Cotton always said he could work miracles. . . . He's beaten the motor boats."

"Just," said Norton beside him. "They're abeam of the battleships."

"That completes the fleet," said the sub contentedly.

They heard out of the mystery of the inshore lights a roar like a distant aeroplane that grew swiftly, sweeping up into a powerful rush of sound.

Then, very faint in the night they saw the white thresh of the bow waves, and the four little ships raced by them, their bows high, the broken water thundering past. Even as they watched the second boat broke out of line and, with a higher, more urgent note, swung away to the north-east. The other three swung swiftly into line abreast—they seemed to be moving, in the darkness, with the precision of clockwork toys. They were gone as suddenly as they had come, and the night was silent again.

The sweep went on slowly. They were level with the first

of the fairway buoys now, less than half a mile from the Outer Bar. Still there was no sign of anything wrong.

Scott was consumed with nervousness. There was on the tiny bridge no place to move, no way in which he could work off his nerves, yet he felt as if he could not be still, as if he had to stamp about, to swing his arms, to swear.

Brook, leaning comfortably against the rail, said once, "Doesn't look like results, O'Hara."

Scott's voice gave him away as he said, "I'm afraid not, sir."

Brook chuckled. "Plenty of time yet. I hardly thought we'd get anything at the first fishing."

A little later he said, "Dammit all man, they must have taken some precautions. . . ."

Scott knew that Brook had sensed his nerves. Curiously the knowledge quieted him. The extreme irritation wore off. The sweep drifted on to the Outer Bar, and still there was no result. Abeam of the winking light the Admiral said, "Changed my mind, make a signal to *Unity*. 'Sweep in to two fathoms water and then sweep due north until further orders.' "

"Masthead, sir."

"No, hand lamp."

The acknowledgment came in a moment, and the little drifter began to sidle in towards the sand.

When she turned there was still no sign.

There was no sign of the other ships, either. *Stormcock* had long since vanished. The destroyer and the motor boats had been swallowed up in the darkness. The Estuary was utterly peaceful.

Then, three minutes after the turn, a signal came from *Gamecock*. 'Gamecock to *Diarmid*. Captain to Vice-Admiral. Have located wire in three fathoms West Oaze buoy bearing 251 degrees distant two cables.' "

Instantly the bridge of the *Diarmid* was alive. An electric current seemed to vitalise the ship. Brook jerked himself out of his comfortable somnolence. "Ha!" he said. "Tell him to anchor and hold on till we come. Full ahead!"

Again there was an ordered bustle on the bridge. Telegraphs whirled, bells rang. Down below the guns' crews stopping chatting, as if they sensed immediate possibilities. The ship began to vibrate, slowly at first, then faster and faster. The air began to stream back over the dodger again. The water rushed past, the white outsplaying from the side spread further and further. Spray began to leap and whip back. The bow wave rose on either hand, enormous, angry, urgent.

Behind them *Unity*, sweeping valiantly across the channel,

diminished to a half-seen shape and merged in her background so that in the end all but her lights were gone.

The West Oaze buoy rushed up to them out of the night, as if it was a fast ship, speeding over still water.

They were in sight of the *Gamecock* when the sub, staring over the patchwork of light and darkness astern called suddenly, "God!"

They wheeled on the word.

Astern of them a vast plume of red flame was hurtling into the night sky. Through the red tongues of fiercer flame stabbed a monstrous flower of evil in the darkness, alive and terrible.

Before the flame had died, Brook was issuing orders. His first was a helm order, and the destroyer heeled wildly further and further over as she spun on her heel in a full-speed turn. The rest came swiftly. There was scarcely need for them, already the pipes were shrilling, men were racing to get the boats ready, to stand by with ropes, lifebelts, anything that would float.

Even as they completed the turn the roar of the explosion reached them, a deep thud like sudden thunder, and a long rolling aftermath.

Cameron took a pad that somebody had thrust into his hand, and said, "Signal coming through from *Unity* as she struck. 'Captain to Vice-Admiral,—Grapnels are fast in . . . That's all, sir.'"

"That's all," said Brook slowly. Then he took up the stream of orders again. "All shipping east of Edinburgh light return to Downs. All shipping north of Mid Barrow, anchor Harwich roads. All shipping west Nore light, anchor Gravesend or line west of Southend pier. All movements area Thames cease immediately. Get that out. Get something out of Sheerness to divert all the small stuff. Southend Piermaster to stop all small stuff coming down the river. Make a preliminary signal to First Lord, and First Sea Lord reporting loss of *Unity* presumed due mine. Details later. Cruisers to move out to Little Nore and lie at single anchor, raising all steam. Recall all local leave Chatham, Sheerness." The strong, resolute voice went on, a curiously marked orderliness in the tone; swift, decisive, determined. Scott listened fascinated.

Suddenly he realised that they were almost up to the Outer Bar light. There was no sign of *Unity*, but over the water hung a thin drift of dark smoke.

The engines of the destroyer went astern with a vibration that threatened to shake the little ship to pieces—emergency reverse. Water piled up astern and swept forward, spume and spray flew. And over the noise of it came the shrilling

of whistles again and the shrill whine of the falls. Searchlights broke out, stuttering beams of light that settled after a moment in fierce brilliance on the near water.

For a moment or two they swept, then they concentrated on a little patch where wreckage floated, a pitiful huddle of shattered planks, and unidentifiable rubbish. Three men showed in the middle of it, clinging to the bigger pieces. A fourth head showed, swimming twenty yards away. Nearer still a body showed, the head submerged.

Still carrying a little way the destroyer slid past. The boats were already in the water. In a moment the motor boat was going ahead, straight for the wreckage.

Out of the dark lane between the buoys noise was coming. Even as *Diarmid's* launch picked up the first group of survivors, a big power barge from one of the battleships shot into the glare of the lights, her engines going hard astern.

She picked up the fourth man. A small boat from the destroyer picked up the body and turned straight back to the ship.

Another of the battleships' boats arrived, they could see the lights of slower craft hurrying out. Some sort of paddle-steamer was labouring up from the fairway. The circle of the searchlights widened, the boats scattered, hunting through the still water. But there were no more survivors.

Diarmid's launch came back to her. Brook went down from the bridge. A voice hailed them from alongside. "Sub-Lieutenant Duff, sir, and two ratings."

"Bring Duff to me if he's not hurt," said Brook abruptly. "Cameron, I want this area kept clear. Get hold of one of the barges, tell them to hound off everything in sight, and then to turn back everything to the other side of Southend. We won't bother Sheerness to send anything else out yet."

They brought Duff up to the sea cabin. He was still dripping, his face had a long black smear over one side, and he was coatless and bootless. He did not appear to be hurt, but his eyes were widely dilated, and his mouth twitched.

"Sit down," said Brook instantly. "Get him a glass of whisky, Norton. What happened?"

"A mine, I think, sir. I was on the bridge. . . . Commander Burke had superseded me, sir, according to your orders."

"Yes, yes," said Brook impatiently.

"And on his instructions. . . ." The boy was not to be hurried. His mind was still groping desperately for sanity in chaos. Brook saw it and checked his impatience. "On his instructions I was on the bridge, sir. He was supervising the after windlass. He called up to me that the sweep had

got something, and I went astern . . ." The boy passed his hand wearily over his face.

"Ye-es?" said Brook in a voice that would have charmed confidences from a statue.

The boy recovered himself. "I checked her way, and they came in on the windlass. Then something jammed, and they juggled with the windlass for a while. Then whatever it was freed. One of the seamen aft with Burke said, 'It's come away with a run, sir.' And then the whole ship was lifted clean out of the water. Like that." The boy made a weak little gesture. "That's all sir."

"Very good, Duff. Finish your drink and then go aft and turn in."

"Oh, no, sir. I—I'm——"

"You turn in," said Brook gently. "We'll call you . . ."

Scott found Ann in the dark of the wing of the lower bridge. She grasped his arm in a grip that hurt. "Mines?" she demanded.

"Can't be anything else."

"Oh, Scott, Scott, we were right. . . ." Her voice broke, she seemed on the verge of hysteria.

Scott shook her roughly. "Pull yourself together," he said. "It's out of our hands now—we did all that could be done by us. It's all right, I tell you, Ann."

The *Diarmid's* sub came on to the lower bridge. "Oh, you there? Well, what do you think of it?"

"I suppose it had to happen," said Scott drearily.

"Of course you were expecting it. By God, I don't think anybody believed you—on this ship, anyway. I know I didn't. I apologise."

"Don't bother," said Scott wryly. "The Admiral did."

"Just as well," said the sub sententiously, and went up the ladder.

Brook came out. He seemed utterly unperturbed, for a moment he paused in the doorway, then he said, "That you, O'Hara. Well, you seem to have been right."

"Afraid so, sir," said Scott slowly.

"Well, better the *Unity* than the *Barham*," said Brook quietly. And added, "Poor devils."

CHAPTER XXI

Diarmid began to move again, heading round out to sea, leaving the buoying of the wreck and the last of the search to the shore boats.

Ann said, "Where are we going, now?"

"Don't know," said Scott. "I've missed the last moves. Back to *Stormcock*, I expect. Do you want to come up to the bridge?"

Ann shivered, and shook her head. "I'll wait in here." She left him, and Scott went up the ladder again.

Brook made room for him. "Mines," he said slowly, "but what sort of mines, we've been all through the channel, and dozens of other craft have used it. They're not moored at normal depth. I've ordered a sweep, but I don't expect it will show us anything. . . . Now we'll see what *Stormcock's* got."

A little later he said, "It's the big thing that you saw under tow which worries me—the mines are probably on the bottom with special release gear, we'll find that out in the morning Can you see *Stormcock* yet, Norton?"

"Her lights are just clear of the buoy, sir."

"Good."

The destroyer was stopped almost alongside the little ship. She lay still in the silent water, her outline vague in the darkness. Brook himself hailed her through a speaking trumpet, his voice carried crisply over the silence.

A reply came from *Stormcock*. "We've got the end, sir."

"Hydrophone?"

"No, sir, electrical gear of some sort. Can't make it out."

"Careful with it. Is the line heavy?"

"No, sir."

"Can you bring it in by hand?"

"We'll try, sir."

"I'll send you ten men. Get it in by hand, use your engines when you're sure of the line of it, and if there's any change in the resistance, hang on. *Barham's* sending out divers. Send your boat, we've left ours behind."

Ten volunteers were sent over, and *Diarmid* lay off for a while, watching the work. A launch came out from *Barham* with two divers and a crew. She lashed alongside *Diarmid* and waited too. There was no sign from the outer dark. The peace of the evening had closed again on the work as on the tragedy.

On the drifter they got in the cable slowly and methodically, fathom after fathom of it silver out of the dark water.

Diarmid jockeyed about in the run of the tide, coming up to her and falling away. On one of her approaches Rentoul from the *Stormcock*, called across, "Come to a branch line, sir."

"Cut and buoy it; continue on the main cable."

There was no excitement in the night now. The work seemed straightforward, almost dull. For twenty minutes more it went on. There was one more branch cable, which was duly buoyed. Twice *Diarmid* went ahead to hunt off returning sludge boats and tugs, and send them round by way of the Mouse. Coming back from one of these sheep-dog expeditions, she was hailed again from the drifter.

"Cable's fouled, sir."

"Send the diver down."

"He's just going over the side, sir."

In the flash of a torch they saw the domed head of a diving helmet sinking under the water. The diving boat had abandoned *Diarmid* early on and tied up to *Stormcock*.

After three minutes delay the diver reported by telephone.

"Our line joins on a main cable, sir. Fairly heavy stuff."

"Can he follow it under water?"

"He'll try, sir. The tide's pretty heavy."

There was a long silent interval, then the voice came again.

"Cable buried in the sand, sir."

"Get the grapnel under the main cable and bring it aboard then."

They had to work the new cable with the windlass—gingerly, cautiously, testing it from time to time. Another twenty minutes went by. Then there was a further interruption. The cable had jammed again.

Once more the diver went down. He was silent for some while, then Rentoul's voice came triumphant through the speaking-trumpet. "End of the cable, sir; it runs into a large metal construction of some sort, possibly a wreck of a small ship, bottom upwards. It's partly sunk in the sand."

"What luck," said Brook to himself. "The tow——"

"Send the second diver down to help him. See if they can find out anything about it."

Diarmid moved in little jerks; Norton was determined not to let her fall away.

"Diver says it's smooth, like a dome, sir. Streamlined. A sweep would go clean over it. Stands less than a fathom above the bottom."

Again there was a little wait, then Rentoul said, "Seems to be some sort of door."

A signalman came on to the bridge with a pad. "Signal, sir."

Brook glanced at it, shot out his under lip, and said, "Full ahead. Knock John and the Black Deep, the M.T.B.'s are in trouble. He passed the pad to Norton to read. Norton passed it to Scott.

It was from Grant to the Vice-Admiral. "Am in action with cable steamer four motor boats Sunk Head light bearing ten degrees true distant four miles."

Scott had barely read it when another signal came.

"Falling back aid M.T.B.'s no sign cable steamer position given."

"Got 'em," said Brook harshly. "All the same . . . yes. Bring out the light cruisers, Cameron. Give 'em the position. Details to First Lord and First Sea Lord. And tell Grant we're coming. Your W.O.'s are working double shifts to-night, Norton."

They were hurtling through the still water now, already they were almost at top speed, flinging through the narrow waters at thirty-six knots. The wind drummed over the dodger in a ceaseless roaring, it was difficult to breathe against, difficult to hear anything that was said. When Brook wished to speak he pulled down whoever it was behind the shelter of the screens. Once he pulled Scott down.

"That dome affair," he said abruptly. "Control station for some patent type of controlled minefield. The gadget at the end of the cable must have been some kind of detector gear for fixing the position of ships over the minefield. We'll find more of 'em to-morrow. I hope Grant has the sense to keep out of trouble."

They were at the Edinburgh lightship within twenty minutes of leaving the *Stormcock*. As they brought it abeam another signal came up. It was from Rentoul—one of the divers reported signs of life inside the dome. Almost on its heels came a signal from Grant, stuttered out on the tiny wireless of his little ship.

"Number Four run down believed sunk stop Have disabled one motor boat another on fire stop Cable ship has turned heading seaward stop Holding our own."

With the roar of the wind overhead came, very faintly, the boom of a light gun.

Diarmid seemed almost to lurch forward, as if she was answering the urgent summons of the gun. She was hurtling along at the very top of her speed in still water, the boom of her powerful engines came back at them from the bottom, on either quarter they carried a high, racing wave. Signal halliards chattered like castanets in a wild Tarantella, through the rigging the wind sang with a deep, sustained note.

They passed the last of the spoil-ground buoys and hurtled on into the absolute darkness.

Scott had the feeling that they were racing now to avenge the skipper, to make good his sacrifice, to do honour to his memory. Already they were close on the waters where he had died, close to the scene of their terrible battle with the night and the tide. Hastening to a new battle, to a fight that would wipe out the old one, that would pay all debts, settle all that was outstanding. Already their work was done, the whole scheme was laid bare, the purpose defeated.

Brook's mind seemed to be working that way too. He pulled Scott down again. "I think we'll find they've done the same thing at Portsmouth and Plymouth Sound. Perhaps Portland too. Easier job there; deep water. I think they were after the battleships—if they could get four or five as they moved out to war stations. . . . Perhaps they hoped for more. Even four or five would make a difference to the balance of power. If it's to be a war of quick striking, it might make all the difference. Suppose war was declared by a mass air raid, and as soon as the battle fleet tried to get together this happened . . . there's no saying."

Norton interrupted him. "Star shell, sir."

"Ha." Brook straightened himself. "That's not in the Black Deep, that's east of the Long Sand somewhere. Try to get Grant, get a position and course from him, it's time we knew. What's *Heron* up to now? A searchlight broke out low down on the water and swept round, blinking inshore. They could not see the actual light, but the loom of it was clear enough.

Brook bent down to read a pile of signals that had come in from the Admiralty. They wanted news, news, news. On the navyphone the wireless-room gave them a message from Grant.

"Barrow Deep bearing distant six miles 290 degrees course 340 stop Two of enemy in sight steering 340."

Almost immediately after came a message from Number 10.

"Enemy launch ashore Long Sand standing by."

The Admiral himself plotted the first position. "Been as near as makes no difference on the Long Sand himself," he said, shaking his head. "We'll keep as we go, Norton. Guns' crews close up."

The ship was at action stations, the new order heightened the tension suddenly. Up to now it had been a wild chase, a hurtling through the night—now there was battle ahead.

All through the darkened ship men were crouched at the breeches of the guns, ready at the torpedo tubes, standing at ammunition hoists and in the magazines, ready at fire hoses and searchlights, at depth charge throwers and the multitudinous pulsating machines.

The minutes raced by. Thirty-five minutes since they had left the *Stormcock*; thirty-six; thirty-seven. . . . Norton said suddenly:

"Starboard, sir, three points . . ."

"Lights," snapped Brook.

The sub at the searchlight control threw in the switch. Intense light flared out behind them, staggering across the night. "Lights," said the sub. "Starboard three, sir."

The great beam wheeled, swung round the empty sea until it settled on the grey hull of one of the M.T.B.'s. She was lurching along, poised on an enormous bow wave. A tiny model of a boat on a make-believe sea, very clear against the darkness beyond. From her the light swept on, hesitated, and settled on a second grey hull. This was different, though, a long, low hull, longer than that of the M.T.B.; leaner, not so high out of the water.

Even as the light settled it spat fire, a little burst of flames. Water leapt astern of the M.T.B.

"Open fire, sir?" Norton's voice was tense with excitement.

"Put a shell well ahead of him," said Brook decisively.

There was a little pause, the light almost lost the grey boat, then settled again. Behind him Scott heard a long series of monotonous figures from the range-finders. Brief orders, curt checking. Then there was a burst of flame. Acrid cordite smoke whipped back across the bridge and stung eyes and nostrils. The concussion seemed to shake the little ship bodily. Smoke whipped from them across the beam of the light, and was dazzlingly silver for an instant.

Well ahead of the enemy a high plume of spray rose like a tree against the night.

"Make a signal to Grant—that is Grant's ship, isn't it? To get out on his starboard quarter and keep him in the channel. . . . I think we have the legs of him, Norton."

"It's a close thing, sir."

"What is *Heron* up to?"

"Sounds busy, sir. That's a heavy gun."

"Six inch or near it," said Brook, rubbing his hands.

"What's this fellow got——?"

There was another spurt of flashes from the low grey boat, a fractional pause, and then three clanging hits along the destroyer's side. "Good man," said Brook. "That's a

light pom-pom of some sort—heavier than ours, though. Did you count the burst? ”

“ Six, I made it, sir.”

“ And three hits—good shooting. All the same, we’ll have to give it to him now. Open up, Norton. Independent fire.”

There was an almost simultaneous crash of three of the destroyer’s guns. A forest of shell bursts showed about the little craft. Instantly she twisted like a snipe, heading with astonishing swiftness for the destroyer. For a moment she ran like that, then she sheered away, exposed her broadside for a moment, and turning through the full sixteen points headed off in the other direction.

“ Torpedo, sir? ”

“ Looks like it. Bring her round. Number Seven will foul the range in a minute. Call your people off.”

The destroyer heeled over and swept round until she was at right angles to her previous course. Number Seven had closed the range until her light double machine-gun in the bows was well content. She was firing a long stream of bullets now. It was impossible to see if they hit. Sensing the destroyer’s difficulty, however, she began to edge away again. Instantly Norton opened fire.

“ Come round again,” said Brook brusquely. “ Be on the sand in two minutes. I think that’s his game. What *has* *Heron* picked up.”

They could see gun flashes along the horizon now, the noise of the exchange came to them in short, staccato bursts. The four point sevens of the destroyer were easy to distinguish from the heavier, deeper thud of the enemy.

A signalman thrust his pad into the light of the chart table. The message was from Number Six. It read :

“ Ashore Gunfleet with enemy torpedo boat hope float again shortly within enemy range but all right.”

“ He’s out of the picture,” said Brook grimly. “ Any reply from *Heron* yet? ”

“ No, sir.”

“ Hit,” said the First Lieutenant.

“ Got her, by God,” said Brook. “ Leave her to Number Seven now, Norton. We’ll go and see what’s happened to *Heron*. There’s a light on the end of the Long Sand Head, is there? ”

“ No, sir.”

“ Keep her wide. Where are the cruisers, Cameron? ”

“ Must be near the Edinburgh light, sir.”

“ Tell ’em to keep on coming. Can’t spare anything to

help Number Six till we know what's happening to *Heron*."

"She's still firing three guns, sir."

The searchlight trained round as the destroyer swept by. The motor boats diminished in the distance. The grey one was still moving, but slowly. Number Seven could command the range now.

A long message came from *Stormcock*. The divers were unable to force an entry into the dome, but they were certain that there were men inside. Rear-Admiral Blakeney was with her now. He advised getting down the P.L.A. wreck lighters and lifting the whole thing bodily. The lighters were on their way.

Brook sent back a single word, "Approve," to Norton, he said, "Blackeney must have missed the cruisers, he'll be mad."

They raced on. The rush of the wind, the crash of the spray, the hurl and leap of the driven water made a long chant, a pagan hymn, pregnant with force, with vigour, with danger. This was no flying to the rescue, it was a battle challenge, a racing to fight, a leap to war.

There was silence on the little bridge under the roar of their passage. For a long space there were no orders, no commands. *Diarmid* had turned the end of the sand now, she was sweeping straight as an arrow for the welter of gun flashes and smoke, the flicker of searchlights and the roll of battle.

Through their own silence and over the roar of the wind of their passage they heard a droning, high above them. Harsh, urgent noise, the unmistakable noise of aircraft. Almost as they heard it a signal came in. Cameron said:

"Seaplanes from the battleships, sir, asking permission to attack."

"Throw them in," said Brook. "I don't think they'll be any God's use in the dark, but we've got to give the battleships a show."

"They've got steam up, sir."

"Oh, have they? Well, they can keep it."

"They're hoping there's heavy stuff in support outside," said Cameron doubtfully.

"There won't be," snapped Brook. "Dammit d'they think I hadn't appreciated that. These chaps have been caught out, there's nothing in support or it would have been in long since. How many planes are there?"

"Four, I think, sir. The Air Ministry offered assistance half an hour back."

"Don't want it. Nothing they could do. Tell two of the planes to make a search to the eastward. They won't see anything, but it'll keep 'em busy and please the battleships."

The other two would do most good dropping parachute flares, supposing they have them. What's the range now ? "

Norton said, " Fifteen thousand yards, sir. They're moving east pretty fast."

" Anything from *Heron* ? "

" Can't raise an answer, sir."

" Aerials shot away. Keep calling her by searchlight until you get an answer."

There was another long silence. Then a signal came from Grant. " Enemy Motor boat surrendered, sinking."

" Who's sinking ? Number Seven or the enemy ? " said Brook caustically. " Well, taking it that if he can send he's still afloat, tell him to go and look for Number Ten. Anything from her ? Try to get something. Where are the cruisers ? "

" Clear of the spoil ground, sir."

" We haven't heard anything from Number Six for a long while."

" She doesn't answer, sir."

" Dammit, what's wrong with our signalling ? First *Heron*, now her. Ask the cruisers to try to get in touch by searchlight. She spoke last from the Long Sand. How's the range ? "

" We've picked up twelve hundred yards, sir."

" Good."

" There go the flares."

Scott thrust his head out of the shelter and stared ahead. The wind forced tears from his eyes and whipped the moisture away. Through the blurred vision he saw lights like low stars, sinking slowly towards the sea. The rumble of the guns was appreciably closer now, and it was possible to make out the relative positions of the two ships. *Heron* was lying well to the north, presumably slightly ahead of the other ship. He judged that they must have passed the Outer Gabbard already, heading for the open sea.

As he watched *Heron* began to answer the plaintive calling of the *Diarmid's* light.

In swift morse the winking light leapt across the darkness, stammering out a tale of near disaster.

" Cable ship armed three six inch one bow two stern also torpedoes stop Have been hit thirteen times all electric circuits destroyed number two gun out of action midships tubes out of action two hits water line leaks under control three dead twelve wounded stop Believe secured seven hits no apparent result fired three torpedoes, no result stop Am closing range to try again."

" Tell him to open out, wait for us. What is her speed ? "

" Twenty-seven knots."

The Admiral made some rapid calculations. "Ought to be within hitting range within half an hour, and up with her in forty-five minutes. What are the cruisers doing?"

"Thirty-four, sir."

"They won't be much use for a while. Norton, we'll pull out on her starboard quarter a little." He bent over the chart. "Keep her well above the Galloper until we are clear."

"Very good, sir."

The little ritual of changing course went through un-hurriedly, the destroyer lurched slightly away from her course, settled to the new one and without changing the measured rhythm of her onward rush, swept on.

The next signal came from *Amaranth* the leading light cruiser.

"Survivors M.T.B. 6 on Long Sand with captured survivors enemy boat M.37. Shall I pick up?"

"Make back the affirmative," said Brook curtly. "*Astrius* to join Flag all possible speed. *Amaranth* drop her motor boats and come on. No need for her to wait, the night's still enough." He turned suddenly to Scott. "Can't leave 'em on the sand all night, can we?"

Involuntarily Scott shuddered.

Brook grunted and was silent for a moment, then he said, "That's three of them and two of us—so far. I hope Number Ten doesn't catch it before Grant gets over. What's the range, Norton?"

"Below nine thousand, sir."

"That trouble with our boats is that they're not built for this sort of brawl, the pop guns they carry aren't any manner of use in a scrap like this. They're torpedo boats first and last. The other people have thought of this sort of dog fight, apparently, I hope they'll save one of 'em whole for us, I'd like to know how they mount that pom-pom on a light hull."

The sub, on the other side of Scott, tensed suddenly. "To port sir—four points."

"Lights," said Brook sharply.

The great beam swept out again, dazzling across the water. It clawed stiff jointed for a moment and then settled. Fair in its sweep a white motor cruiser rushed along, almost on parallel courses, her bows high, with a sweeping outward curve, her stern almost flush with the mound of water behind her.

Palpably she was flying, a hunted thing. In her very outline, brilliant white against the black beyond, she was terrified, abject almost.

She showed no lights.

CHAPTER XXII

"THAT'S her, sir." Scott's voice shook as he spoke.

"The watch boat? H'mmm."

"Open fire, sir?" Norton was almost dancing with impatience.

"One across her bows," said Sir Francis quietly.

Number two gun thundered. Water leapt high in the searchlight again. Instantly some one on the white boat clamoured out on to the deck and began waving a white cloth vigorously.

Her bows dropped swiftly as her engines were switched off. She lay rocking until the destroyer's wash reached her, then she flung about violently.

"Tell her to get back to the Sunk light and wait there," said Brook coldly. "She won't do it, but we've no time to worry about her. Keep the light on her as long as you can."

The thud of the six-inch guns on the "cable-ship" were infinitely closer now, their yellow flashes were brilliant against the sky. *Heron*, outranged, was making no reply, there was no sign of her even in the darkness to the north-east; it was difficult to see what the gunners of the "cable ship" were laying their guns on.

Brook watched the swiftly vanishing motor boat for a moment, and then bent over the chart table again. "Range?" he demanded.

"Five thousand two hundred."

"Where are the cruisers?"

"*Astrius* is making the Sunk, sir. *Amaranth* is making up slightly on her. The planes report nothing abnormal to the eastward, sir. They ask permission to change with those over the enemy, they've dropped all their bombs."

"No hits?"

"Apparently not, sir."

"Hardly thought there would be. Yes. Tell 'em to make the exchange, and tell the others to get back to—Felixstowe will do—in plenty of time. I don't want to have to waste destroyers searching for a crash round about dawn. I suppose we can't get one or two more revolutions."

"We're a knot and a half over our designed speed already, sir. I doubt——"

"H'mm, can't have everything, I suppose."

Cameron came on to the bridge again. "Signal from First Sea Lord, sir."

"Submit in view enemy's superior armament await arrival cruisers before forcing resumption action, your discretion."

"Humph. Feet cold," said Brook, with a snort. "Make back. Being discreet. No, old James won't like that. Make back. Consider essential check enemy before dawn, possibility fog later. Range, Norton?"

"Four thousand six hundred."

"All right, we'll begin to draw his fire. Carry on, Norton."

Once again the tension of the little ship was screwed up until it was almost unbearable. Until the very air felt like a taut wire, stretched almost to the point of breaking. Orders, counter orders, quick movements filled the little bridge for a moment, while the tension heightened every second. Then the great beam of the light swept across the night again like a sword.

Though, for close on three-quarters of an hour *Diarmid* had been well within range of the enemy's six-inch guns, there had been no attack. Even when they had put the light on the motor boat there had been no attempt from the bigger ship; now, however, even as her guns spoke together, there was an answering flash from the flying ship, and a moment later the scream of a shell overhead.

The light settled on the fugitive. It showed her hull, unscarred as far as they could tell from two and a half miles away, it showed her funnel—thick black smoke stretched back from it fouling the range astern—perhaps that was why there had been no sign from her, Smoke showed also a little for'ard of her funnel. Spurting apparently from the accommodation.

The guns crashed again, and the light jerked off the enemy, wavered, and settled back. Her own guns flashed fire—two of them this time. Shells whistled overhead, perilously close.

The crash, the whine of shells, the roar of the airplanes overhead, merged into a frantic thunder. A flare dropped well ahead of the enemy, and for a moment showed him in sharpest silhouette; before it had sunk far the flying ship had passed underneath and was showing up in silver in the light of it. A moment later and *Diarmid* herself was lit up by the brilliance.

Brook said coolly, "Call 'em off. No more flares, our own lights will do all we want."

The roar went on.

"Heron asking permission to close the range, sir."

"No, we're in the line of the ricochets."

The thunder and the crash went on.

"Planes asking permission to attack by dive bombing."

"Yes, we'll hold our fire, open out the range a little, Norton."

The roar of the planes overhead changed to a furious snarl.

They saw something shoot like a giant bird across the light as the searchlight swung upward on a roll, and then a high splash close to the enemy.

In the same instant they were hit. The forecastle seemed to erupt underneath them, flame and the reek of high explosive fumes. Metal clanged against the metal shield of the bridge, went off shrieking into the air astern, fell thudding into the tiny enclosure. The little ship staggered.

And then, as suddenly, everything was silent again, the destroyer went on, her speed undiminished. Voices shouted up from below. Norton said :

"Shell in the mess deck, sir. Number one gun out of action."

"Casualties?"

Below them they could hear some one calling monotonously, "Stretcher bearers, stretcher bearers."

Behind them the sub said, "Bayne's killed, sir."

"Scott turned and was aware of the sub crouched over a crumpled figure a yard away from him."

Norton said, "Get a man up to replace him."

The first lieutenant arrived on the bridge. "Damage not serious, sir," he said breathlessly. "Mounting of number one gun damaged, but we should be able to clear it. The mess deck is wrecked, one large hole and two small ones in the side plating. Three men killed, four wounded."

Another shell shrilled overhead, and they ran into a fountain of spray from yet another.

Brook said, "*Heron* to close and attack with torpedoes." He paused for a moment. "How long will it take her to get in position?"

"About five minutes, I should think, sir."

"Tell him to close slowly then, but not to attack for nine minutes; we ought to be on her beam by then, and roughly in position to attack ourselves."

Shells whistled over again.

Brook said grimly, "Close the range again Norton, and resume fire."

Instantly the number two gun began to speak again. The night thunder rose.

A signal came through from *Astrius*, she had sighted the motor cruiser.

"How was she steering?"

"Due east, sir."

"Tell *Astrius* to sink her, but not to waste any time—I told her to make for the Sunk light, that doesn't lie due east."

The firing went on. A shell splinter ripped through the funnel immediately behind them, a splinter smashed against the side of the wheel-house below, a splinter whirled between the men at the starboard machine gun.

Two red bursts showed on the flying enemy, and Norton said quietly, "Hits, sir."

Another red burst showed—and stayed. "She's on fire, sir."

A shell went through the funnel behind them—almost through the hole that the splinter had made.

There was a quiet spell. Only one gun was firing from the enemy's stern. *Diarmid's* number two gun jammed, but the after gun was bearing now. Below them, high over the sound of the wind, they could hear number two gun's crew swearing as they wrestled with the defect.

A signal came through from *Astrius*.

"Have sunk enemy motor boat. *Amaranth* will pick up survivors."

Brook said softly, "He'd have been better advised to have gone to the Sunk."

The staccato bark of the after gun cut across the end of his sentence like an exclamation mark. One of the planes zoomed down low over them and went off, flying north-west.

"Going into Harwich," said Norton through the roar and rumble of the fight.

Another great column of spray from a shell just ahead rose as they roared towards it and fell back, drenching the bridge. As it passed Cameron came to the bridge again. "Signal from the planes, sir. Fog to the eastward."

"Close the range," said Brook grimly.

Cameron turned to Scott. "Miss Coppard's hurt," he said curtly.

Brook heard him. "Better go down." He said, "Badly?"

"No, sir."

But Scott was gone already. The wind tore viciously at him as he dropped down the vertical ladder. At the bottom he had to step over the body of Baynes, the signalman who had been killed on the bridge. The space outside the wheelhouse was cluttered with wreckage. Stuff that had blown there in the crash which wrecked the forecastle. Another signalman below shouted, "Easy, sir. This way; ladder's gone."

Then he was somehow back at the sea cabin. Ann was lying on the settee, and a young seaman was bending over her.

"She's round now, sir. Found her lying there, we did. Lot of stuff come aft, something must have hit her."

Ann said drowsily, "Thanks, I'm all right. Is that you, Scott? What happened?"

"Direct hit on the forecastle," said Scott abruptly. "Are you badly hurt, Ann?"

"My head's sore. I don't think anything else . . . The white boat was there . . . I called to you."

"She's finished," said Scott.

"Did we?"

"No, *Astrius*."

The destroyer shook again, there was a sound like scrap-iron falling on hollow metal from a vast height.

She said slowly, "I'm glad it wasn't us." It was as if she had not heard this latest hit, this tremendous, thundering sea against the ship.

Scott said, "Can I leave you?" And went out into the sudden night.

The same signalman said incredibly, "No damage done, sir. All noise that was. What's he goin' to do?"

Scott took him to mean the Admiral. He said nothing. The signalman said, "Mouldies I expect it'll be. We're about right now."

Scott climbed back to the bridge. Ann was all right, she was not badly hurt, and he could not stay there, cooped up in the cabin while battle roared outside. Something compelled him to climb to the reeling bridge, some urge that he could not defy, could not defeat.

He went back to his old place. "She all right?" asked Brook instantly, and without waiting for an answer, said, "Portsmouth's found a wire—off Horse Sand Fort. It was the battleships . . ."

Another of the endless signals came in. It was from Grant. "All enemy motor boats now accounted for."

Brook said, "Get the motor boats back to port."

Scott stared out at the enemy again. The big ship was burning furiously now, a long streak of flame showed just forward of the funnel, light seemed to pulse from it in waves that grew and were gone, and pulsed suddenly back into life again.

The number two gun was firing again now, the jam cleared. Number one was still silent. They were not using the searchlights now, and the single plane that still roared overhead dropped no flares. Despite the guns the night seemed quieter, as if it were waiting for something to happen, for some terrible manifestation. Some brutal display of power.

Another signal came through.

"*Astrius* asking if she can open fire, sir; she's got the range."

"How much?"

"Seven thousand yards, sir."

"She can try."

The planes reported fog again, a new bank, just forming, a handful of miles away.

Scott realised suddenly that the enemy must know of the

fog too, must be struggling to get to it, to thrust into its thin, tenuous shelter that was yet the only perfect shelter for such a fugitive as she. He thought suddenly of the dreadful strain of that expectation, that urgent hope, that terrible desire for safety.

He was almost sorry for the great blundering thing, driving like a hunted whale, no longer safe in its friendly sea. Little pictures of the blind and anxious hope of the men in her hull flashed across his mind. Of the men who knew that unless the fog could take them to its shelter—death must. He knew suddenly what was in the terror of the night, in the terror of what was about him on the bridge the swift and ruthless routine of the chase drove on. He heard figures muttered and short staccato commands. Voices spoke on loud-speaker telephones and faded away. A bell rang once, sharply and insistently. Behind him voices called and were answered. Below him men swore and were sworn at, metal clanged, the great breech-block slammed to. The gun thundered. The flash washed everything about him with bright light for an instant and was gone. Metal clanged again. Voices called. Everything came in snatches, ripped and tattered by the wind. Nothing was whole, the night was a wild and horrible dream of broken lights and battered sounds, awful noises that were and that ceased as suddenly. Wails and the shriek of flying metal, and the clang of steel. Mutterings of men's voices.

Behind him somebody said, "All tubes ready, sir."

He understood that some crucial moment had come. Brook was bent in the shelter of the chart table. His night glasses dangled from their strap and banged against the edge of the table, his uniform cap was pulled down until all his forehead was hid, his face showed green and stained with dirt and weariness. He said softly :

"Carry on."

Norton stepped away from him and there was a faint stir. A switch was thrown in. Scott heard nothing—saw nothing. He was staring still at the red flower of the fire that flickered now almost on their beam. In these last minutes they seemed to be gaining more swiftly.

In a moment he turned. Far behind him red flashes showed in the night. For an instant he wondered how *Heron* had got there, then he remembered *Astrius*. She must be ranging on the flame, it was impossible to see what her shells did, he swivelled round and stared at the flying boat again, no red flashes of hits showed there.

On the bridge they seemed to be expecting something, awaiting something with eager anticipation. Nothing happened. Somebody was counting seconds, a voice said :

"Missed."

The bow gun fired again. The after gun fired. Norton was giving orders again, once more there was a little stir. This time Scott, looking aft, heard a dull thud that was neither gun nor shell burst. A second torpedo went over the side and threw up a fountain of spray.

Again there was the same curious, intent waiting.

Again nothing happened.

The third torpedo hit.

Scott was not prepared for it, not expecting anything, scarcely believing in anything. The flash of the burst came suddenly out of silence, a giant flame to the left of the red flower. In the same instant *Diarmid's* searchlight tore the night in two. They saw the cable ship like a silver ghost against the night, abeam, very white in the light; a cloud of smoke and spray stood like a tall tree for an instant and then fell, as a tree falls, bending slowly away. The cable ship turned her high clipper bows towards them, as if in a death flurry she was trying to ram. For a moment the turn looked dangerous, vicious, the last frantic fury of a dying creature.

Then the turn went on, the sharp edge of the bows was lost. She swung round with a list that increased even as they watched.

"Cease fire," said Brook gruffly. "Alter course to conform."

The destroyer was suddenly silent. Sound went out of the night, only the roar of the wind and the whine of the rigging stayed with them.

Then after a moment that too, began to fall. The destroyer decreased speed. The cable ship was spinning on her heel now, swinging round and round in a long, endless curve. Norton said:

"Steering gear jammed, sir."

"Looks like it," said Brook, his glasses to his eyes. "Have they hauled down their flag?"

"No, sir."

"Don't want to open fire again. Make a signal with the masthead lamp, ask him if he surrenders."

As if those at the enemy's guns had heard his question, the answer came, long before the masthead lamp flashed bright. The flash showed like an angry streak, the shell whined past, so close that they felt the wind of its passage, and disappeared in the darkness.

"Rapid, independent, lyddite," said Brook instantly.

The roar of the guns began again. Another searchlight swept out of the night; *Heron*, her lights working again after a long interval. She too, fired.

They could see the flag fluttering high at the masthead. Fire was sweeping the decks of the enemy now, great gouts of flames

roared up, sparks swept like rockets. Every shot hit now, every shell told. They could see the scattered brilliance of the bursts, could see the flames inside thrust out through the new-made holes.

The list increased. The cable ship was almost stopped now, but every now and then a gun spoke defiantly, and once they saw a red, answering flame on *Heron*, and instantly her lights went out again.

For a minute and a half perhaps, *Diarmid's* was the only beam, then two more swept out of the night. *Astrius* was up. Her six-inch guns matched the lonely defiance of the enemy's last remaining gun. Then that too, was silent.

"Cease fire," said Brook again, and *Diarmid's* light winked out over the night.

The flag still fluttered defiantly high on the mast.

Slowly, cautiously, *Diarmid* closed the wreck. She was quite stationary now. Smoke rose from her and hung, flame splashed its underside with red, sparks whistled up to meet it. Flames leapt from the great fire amid ships, and from two lesser fires aft. Abreast of the funnel the cable ship was riddled like a watchman's bucket. Nobody could be alive in the hell of her engine-room. Steam rose white and pink through the duller reds of the smoke. No lights showed, but the glare of the flame lit up every foot of her unwieldy length.

Her boats caught and blazed furiously.

Still the flag flew at the masthead.

Diarmid kept bow on to her, exposing as little of herself as might be to a possible torpedo. They could not know if she had tubes, they could not know the safe lines of bearing. They could see men on her decks now. A group clustered on the forecastle, where there was no flame yet. The swing had brought the low side towards *Diarmid*, they could see the deck canted over, spread out for their eyes almost in plan. There was another small group of men at the stern, busy over a raft of some sort. As Scott watched they pushed it into the water with a splash. Three men jumped after it.

Brook said, "I'm going to ignore the flag. *Heron* to close on the high side and lower boats. We haven't got any boats. Tell him 'I'm coming alongside to take survivors aboard. *Astrius* to send her boats in, but to keep out herself. Norton, can you make out **where** the second after gun is?"

"The for'ard gun is out of action, sir, knocked clean off its mounting. The starboard after gun is just clear of the little deckhouse there; I should judge it's out of action. The port gun is in the way of that fire at the stern, sir. Shouldn't think he could use it."

They were so close now that they could hear the roar of the flames, could hear the high-pitched screaming of a man, could



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see figures on the cable ship's bridge, and white faces turned towards their light.

Again the masthead light began to flicker, asking for surrender. Still there was no answer.

Brook said, "Put our bows against the forecastle, just abaft the anchor, that fire's spreading fast."

Norton bent to the voice-tube.

Even as he did so, Brook said, "Too late. Dead slow ahead, she'll be gone in a second. There—she goes."

Very slowly the cable ship eased herself over and over. Her decks slanted at a swiftly increasing angle, until they were almost at right angles to the water. Then she made a valiant effort to right herself again. For a moment she seemed almost human, striving desperately for some salvation. Then her stern dipped, her bows flung high in the air, men dropped off them, with curious, slow, viscous movements.

Then she was gone, sliding backwards in a cloud of smoke and steam, and flame.

Brook turned to Scott slowly. "That pays for all," he said in a voice utterly unlike his own crisp tones. "Captain Ames can sleep in peace. . . ."

THE END



There are many Members of the Forces who would welcome a chance of reading this book, please pass it on.

